Part II

Nationalism and revolution, 1919–37

From the May Fourth movement in 1919 to Japan’s seizure of Manchuria in 1931 and full-scale invasion of China in 1937, the Chinese state was dramatically reconstituted. The 1920s saw the birth of ideologically charged and militant political parties. The Guomindang or Nationalist Party (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party were not “parties” in the sense of organizations that contested elections, but political organizations building popular, military, and territorial bases of support. Both the GMD and the CCP were Leninist parties, organized from the top down, trying to capture but also empowering urban and rural groups. They worked together to mobilize popular support until the GMD moved to violently suppress the Communists in 1927. Popular social movements spread ideas of citizenship and public participation. A critical press, educational institutions, workers’ organizations, and, finally, a peasants’ movement, all built on the foundations of late Qing developments.

The 1920s saw warlord rampaging, ongoing imperialist pressures, and economic distress. Yet the period was also marked by broad-based social movements. The drive for labor rights in the cities and the rise of peasant movements in the countryside coincided with the social and political claims of women and students. These created a democratic tradition, though not democratic institutions. There was widespread discussion of such notions as the rights of individuals, the autonomy of groups vis-à-vis the state, legal limits on the state, and the principles of majoritarianism, “national salvation,” and economic justice—discussions taking place in tandem with deep-seated social change. Institutionally, the era saw repressive but weak governments that relied on local elites to perform numerous public tasks, including the preservation of order and the collection of taxes. Chambers of Commerce and bankers’ associations were scarcely hotbeds of radicalism, but they were often bitterly critical of the government—sometimes for interfering with them, sometimes for failing to protect them, and sometimes for “selling out” China’s rights. Merchants made alliances with student groups at times to support specific causes, especially anti-imperialist movements. Anti-imperialism was not simply a call for national unity but involved a critique of Chinese leaders and
classes who cooperated with the foreigners. In the complete absence of constitutional protections, dissenters were vulnerable to arrest and assassination, but the relatively weak and very divided states of the 1920s had great difficulty in suppressing entire movements. Sometimes the goal was suppression; other times cooption and control.

Some social groups tried to cooperate with governments to the extent possible. New professionals like lawyers, accountants, and even teachers and professors seldom sought directly to challenge the state. And merchants largely worked around the state to build a modern market system. These groups wanted both to better themselves and, through their skills and economic activities, to contribute to China's future. The 1920s were also marked by popular mobilization and the rise of street politics in China's cities and, in some parts of the countryside, Party-organized peasant protest as well. Intellectuals subjected Chinese tradition and Western imperialism to ever more searching criticisms in the "New Culture" and "May Fourth" movements, deepening the new, oppositionist social groups' understanding of the nature of their enemies. Public opinion, legitimated since the turn of the century, was able to spread in public spaces "ranging from temple grounds and brothels to public parks and theaters... Old conventions guiding public behavior, like meeting in teahouses to mediate or conspire, combined with new ideologies and organization, like unionism and political clubs and parties, to underpin a radical expansion of political participation." The early Republic saw not only the expansion of journalism and education, but also new public parks and open spaces. These became focal points of demonstrations, assemblies, and speech-making. Marchers were quick to seize the opportunities provided by newly widened and paved streets. Chinese governments inefficiently censored the post; the telephone and telegraph were even harder to control.

A new kind of politics arose that brought the warlord era to an end in 1928. Or at least, the rules of warlordism were changed as it was incorporated within the framework of the new Nationalist government. In 1928 the Guomindang under Chiang Kai-shek claimed to have unified the nation through the Northern Expedition. If it was not able to defeat all the warlords — instead inviting many into the GMD and giving them local autonomy — it did destroy the warlord system just twenty years after it began. The GMD, having broken with the Communist Party, also smashed the Communist-led labor and peasant movements. The Guomindang had originated in the revolutionary vision of Sun Yat-sen, who hoped to lead a second, "nationalist" revolution to unify a progressive China against warlords and imperialists. This was not quite to be. In spite of the considerable gains made by the GMD, especially in central China and in the cities, it was unable to penetrate much of the countryside. Rural elites and non-elites generally shared an interest in resisting the government's attempts to extract wealth from the countryside. The "local bullies and evil gentry" stood guard over villages and kept out government agents, and the Nationalist government lacked the resources and the will to reform worsening conditions in the countryside after about 1930.

In retrospect, it is clear that rural China was a site of vast revolutionary potential — not a backwater waiting to be acted upon and shaped by progressive cities but an active agent in its own history. Chinese peasants marched onto the historical stage in this period. They were by no means passive recipients of CCP largesse but actively sought to determine their own fates. The stolid "man with the hoe" image of peasant resignation never fitted Chinese peasants, who were not slow to join bandit gangs, riot against officials, threaten landlords, or simply disappear at tax collection time. After being virtually destroyed in 1927–8, the Chinese Communist Party was reborn in remote hill country. It was during this exile in the "wilderness" that the CCP learned how to mobilize peasant anger and energy through social revolution, how to organize armies and local administration, and how to maintain centralized control over centrifugal tendencies. Mao Zedong's rise to power began in the rural phase of the CCP's evolution. More than any other Chinese political leader, he seemed to understand that the promise of land and social justice was not merely a propaganda technique to win peasant support but lay at the root of the Chinese revolution.

In the realm of foreign policy, the Guomindang government was able to make some progress in revising the unequal treaties. Furthermore, the Western powers came close to conceding, at least in principle, that when China met certain conditions they would relinquish their special privileges. The early 1920s saw a respite of at least the most direct sorts of imperialist pressures, as a new world order emerged from the ashes of World War I. As Japanese hegemony in East Asia grew, however, it increasingly regarded political disorder and nationalism in China as equal threats. Japanese leaders did not believe that warlordism had ended in 1928 — proof that China was incapable of managing its own affairs. The Nationalist Decade (1928–37) was ended by Japan's invasion, but from the beginning of the decade Japan's growing presence in Manchuria and north China left the Nationalists very little room for maneuver and eroded their legitimacy.

Both the failures and the successes of the regime contributed to the growth of the political sphere. To the degree that the Nationalists were able to maintain stability, improve the educational system, and foster commerce, the Nationalist Decade was a success. Businessmen tried to work with the regime in the cities, but students and intellectuals were increasingly critical of the regime's failure to pursue social reform and — especially — to offer greater resistance to Japan. Above all, rural pressures continued to grow, and, though militarily defeated in the mid-1930s, the Communists continued to challenge the GMD for nationalist leadership while pressing for a more vigorous response to Japanese inroads in China.
In the cities, the protests of intellectuals and students suggested a vision of political and social revolution. However, in the face of intensifying Japanese pressure, Chiang Kai-shek's Guomindang moved steadily to the right as it concentrated its resources on exterminating the Communists. Politics was polarized between the right and the left, and between those who called for militant resistance against the Japanese and those who favored accommodating Japanese demands until China was in a stronger position to resist.

8 Politics and culture in the May Fourth movement

"May Fourth" refers to the student demonstrations of that date in 1919, in protest against China's signing of the Versailles Treaty. The Treaty marked the end of World War I and mostly dealt with the disposition of Germany and Austria in Europe, but it also transferred Germany's rights in Shandong to Japan. Most Chinese had expected them to be returned to China. In the wake of the demonstrations, which Beijing's military government tried to suppress, protests spread from the capital to other cities and from the students to other classes, particularly the workers and businessmen of coastal cities. In this sense, the May Fourth incident refers to the original student demonstrations. The May Fourth movement refers to the strikes and boycotts that followed over the next few months. And the May Fourth era refers to the revitalization of the public sphere in China in the early 1920s. The movement represents an entirely new type of grassroots politics based largely on nationalist feelings. But "May Fourth" has come to mean much more even than this.

Indeed, "May Fourth" has become an extremely important but ambiguous notion in all discussions of modern Chinese history. The Communists have (sometimes) gone so far as to trace the origins of their Party to May Fourth. At least, in so far as they saw May Fourth as representing progressive, patriotic elements, as marking the emergence of the working class, and as leading to "cultural revolution"—then they treated May Fourth as the necessary condition for the appearance of the CCP. In the words of Mao Zedong, the "whole of the Chinese revolutionary movement found its origin in the action of young students and intellectuals who had been awakened" by May Fourth.¹ The Nationalists held ambivalent feelings about May Fourth, but the more reformist elements of the GMD identified with its "enlightenment" themes. The May Fourth movement is inextricably associated with political, social, and cultural liberation. Heir to the New Culture movement, it has stood for such conflicting zeitgeists as the rise of communism, the heyday of liberalism, rationality and modernity, science and democracy, national unity, the awakening of young China, labor, and the rejection of tradition. Patriotism, individualism, egalitarianism, and feminism were its watchwords.
The iron house was of course China. It is an ironic comment on the Chinese revolution that Lu Xun became one of its most famous heroes. Though Lu did possess heroic ambitions—he hoped to change Chinese consciousness through literature—his pessimism and detachment were antithetical to the revolutionary stance. Yet he suggested that hope, no matter how feeble, impels action, and logic demands hope. The iron house must be smashed.

In 1919 Lu Xun published a short story about a madman who imagined that the old society and the old morality were entirely based on cannibalism. The classics spoke of “filial piety” but, reading between the lines, he could see they really said, “eat people.” The enemy was clear. In the May Fourth year, the idea of revolution, briefly discredited by the failures of the 1911 Revolution, re-emerged both broadened (to target all the old customs and habits meant by “culture”) and more focused (to target warlordism and imperialism).

The May Fourth movement, 1919–21

On 4 May 1919, some 3,000 students confounded the police by assembling at Beijing’s Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen) and taking to the streets. The demonstration was well organized. Its targets were both the Powers that still seemed bent on carving up China and the Chinese politicians who cooperated with them. Students from thirteen local universities demanded that Chinese negotiators at Versailles repudiate any treaty that failed to restore Chinese sovereignty over Shandong. They also resolved that they would encourage Chinese in Paris to join their protests; that they would try to awaken the Chinese masses and hold a mass meeting in Beijing; and that a permanent Beijing students’ association would be established. The students distributed leaflets to bystanders and carried flags with slogans in English and French as well as Chinese. Only a small number of student representatives were allowed into the Legation Quarter, heavily protected since the Boxer uprising, but even so they found the American, British, French, and Italian ambassadors all out. Letters were left. Several hours had passed in the meantime, and relations worsened between Chinese police and the demonstrators. After a debate, some students decided to march “on to the house of the traitor!”—that is, Cao Rulin.4

Smaller student groups had from the beginning evidently planned to turn the demonstration into a more pointed affair. Their goal was to directly attack the pro-Japanese officials in the Chinese government. Though the details remain surprisingly murky even after numerous memoirs (partly because of conflicting accounts), it was perhaps student anarchists who targeted Cao Rulin (1876–1966), a cabinet member who had been a Qing official and an aide to Yuan Shikai. Cao had conducted most of the negotiations with Japan over the Twenty-one Demands, worked on the Nishihara loans, and was reputed to be a Japanese agent. At Cao’s house, a small riot broke out and five students broke into the house, taking Cao’s bodyguard by
surprise. Fu Sinian, a Beida student of Hu Shi and a future historian who served as a marshal for the demonstration, tried to prevent the march on Cao’s house, but his own brother was one of the students who led the attack. Students poured into the house, smashing furniture and ultimately setting the house on fire. They found Zhang Zongxiang, China’s ambassador to Japan, whom they beat severely. Cao, however, escaped through a window. Meanwhile, small skirmishes broke out between students and police in other parts of the city, though most of the demonstrators soon dispersed. By evening thirty-two students were under arrest; one other was hospitalized and died three days later. Martial law was declared around the Legation Quarter.

As Kuang Husheng (1891–1933), an anarchist and one of the students to break into Cao’s house, recalled, “I saw that a number of my schoolmates were completely resolved to adopt a passionate commitment to resisting authority, to resisting the human bloodsuckers, and to sacrifice themselves. And I felt only the joy of self-sacrifice in going forward together.” It would take blood to build “the ideal society and true liberty.” The demonstration started with just 3,000 marchers, but they represented China’s future intellectual elite. Police on the whole were restrained, it may be that high-level police authorities had no fondness for Cao and it is even more likely that ordinary police, like nearly all Beijing citizens, agreed with the students’ demands. The demonstration had been orderly, even on the way to Cao’s house. However, the arrests of students also turned May Fourth into a spark. The arrested students attracted support from a wide range of Beijing’s citizens, and protests spread to all major cities.

The following two weeks saw numerous student meetings, demonstrations, petition drives, and street speeches. The students raised contributions, publicized the cases of the students who had been arrested, and began organizing high school students. A student union was established in Beijing, including women members. The students banded together, and the government’s attempts to censor the news of the demonstrations by using couriers and foreign telegraph services in Shanghai, radical teachers and students began organizing when the news from Beijing reached the city on 6 May; a Citizens Assembly, which was followed by a protest march, was held on 7 May, and on 8 May the Shanghai Student Union was formed. The anti-Japanese cause proved extremely popular, as it would throughout the twentieth century. Students garnered immediate support from the educational establishment, including most of their own principals and university presidents—as well as chambers of commerce, lawyers’ associations, and other professional groups around China. Workers soon followed, becoming especially important in Shanghai. Demonstrations and strikes spread to yet more cities throughout May.

Direct antigovernment activity was temporarily quieted as the movement shifted to anti-Japanese actions. The student union publicly burned Japanese goods. Across the country, new protest organizations sprouted, and Japanese goods were boycotted. However, government attempts to restrict the protest movement continued. The trial of the thirty-two arrested students opened on 10 May; they refused to plead and demanded that Cao Ruilin and the other “traitors” be put on trial instead. Public opinion tended to agree. Since the government lacked legitimacy, its appeals to the law rang hollow. A national student strike began on 19 May. Students took to the streets and also began sending liaison messages to merchant and worker associations.

Further demonstrations and arrests at the beginning of June brought merchants and workers fully into the struggle. The Beijing government, like most warlord regimes, did not want to go out of its way to persecute popular students, but neither could it cave in to student demands and prosecute its own officials for treason. Diplomatic pressure from Japan was strong; its formal protests demanded the suppression of anti-Japanese activities. However, neither threats nor persuasion could placate the students. After a month of dithering, the Beijing government moved in early June to stamp out student street-lecturing; many students and bystanders were beaten and arrested. By 4 June, temporary jails were overflowing with more than 1,000 detainees. The Beijing students put 5,000 more speakers onto the streets. The news was soon telegraphed to Shanghai.

From the beginning of the movement, Shanghai’s educated elites, notably including the president of Fudan University, had numbered among the
leaders of the protests. Student organizing and petition drives marked much of May, and a vast student strike involving up to 20,000 students ensued on May 26. The students, deliberately and with considerable success, made a patriotic appeal to the entire city. They assembled to swear an oath to "relieve and save [China] from danger and destruction," they paraded through the city, they handed out leaflets, pasted up posters, and put up patriotic street plays. Shanghai student delegates also traveled to the major cities in central and southern China to convey their public relations knowledge to the students of those cities. Their intense seriousness—the students policed themselves quite strictly to make sure none of their number turned to "anarchy" or took advantage of the school closures to, say, go to the movies—impressed the citizens of Shanghai. By June, Shanghai had replaced Beijing as the main focus of the May Fourth movement.

Shanghai students called for a "triple strike"—of classes, work, and markets for June 5—and the city virtually shut down. Still, it took a great deal of organization and persistence to maintain the strike for a week. Students pressured shopkeepers to remain shut. Boy Scouts patrolled the streets to keep order—and to discourage physical attacks on Japanese. The Shanghai General Chamber of Commerce only the students throughout May, but merchants in the less prestigious Shanghai Commercial Federation simply went ahead in June, closing their shops and rebuking the Chamber. The Chamber then went to popular pressure, and the success of various anti-Japanese boycotts from 1919 to 1923 throughout urban China was due to the support of the bourgeoisie. In fact, Shanghai's merchant-dominated native-place associations had been participating in patriotic activities since February, when several petitioned the Beijing government to resist Japan's demands at Versailles. Some merchants, at least, had already begun boycotting Japanese goods in early May. (Students organized groups to check on shopkeepers.) Those proclaimed guilty of the "traitorous behavior" of conducting business with Japanese were expelled from their native-place associations and might well have found it difficult to remain solvent. Though a seemingly more traditional organization than student unions, the native-place associations played a key role in disseminating nationalist ideas and mobilizing support for the movement.

At the same time, workers' strikes finally shut down trade with Japan. In Shanghai, some 60,000 workers went on strike in June. Dockhands refused to load or unload Japanese ships. Japanese-owned textile factories were struck, and then the strikes spread to create a near-total five-day shutdown. The guilds of craftsmen and skilled workers moved to strike, and unskilled workers organized in gangs struck as well. Indeed, the gangs in Shanghai went so far as to order the beggars and pickpockets under their control to desist work. Prostitutes sang patriotic songs instead of their usual come-ons. The strike finally ended on June 12, when the Beijing government dismissed the "three traitorous officials" whom students blamed for giving in to Japan.

In France, under intense pressure from Chinese students and workers there, the Chinese delegation to the peace conference ended by deciding, against instructions from Beijing, not to sign the treaty. The Versailles Treaty was thus concluded on June 28 without official Chinese endorsement. The students had won a great victory. A student—merchant—worker alliance had been created, if only tententially. However, Japan still got to keep Shandong. And warlordism was just entering its most virulent phase. Given these events, why did Chinese citizens decide that, out of thousands of imperialist provocations, the Versailles Treaty was especially horrendous?

Imperialism and liberalism

The Versailles Treaty marked a turning point in Chinese attitudes toward the West. In spite of all the humiliations of imperialism and even the perceived threat of racial extinction, leading Chinese had continued to look to Western nations as a model. But now, in the words of one Beida student, "We at once awoke to the fact that foreign nations were still selfish and militaristic, and they are all great liars."

May Fourth marked a moment of disillusionment. From the point of view of the Powers, Shandong was a small question, but Versailles provided a test which Wilsonian liberalism flunked. The international context was key to the radicalization of Chinese politics. The idea of national self-determination preached by President Woodrow Wilson of the United States had been designed to compete with the appeal of Lenin's anti-colonialism. The October Revolution of the Bolsheviks in Russia had been noted and praised in China by 1918, but Wilson's Fourteen Points were probably better known. Both Wilson and Lenin presented critiques of colonialism, one ameliorative and the other revolutionary. Since during World War I as many as 200,000 Chinese had participated in the war effort as replacement labor in Europe, the Allied victory in November 1918 had been greeted with enthusiasm. It was, in part, China's victory, and not Wilsonian rhetoric alone but also moral debts seemed to augur good treatment of China at Versailles. Indeed, Liang Qichao had originally argued, against great nationalist sentiment, that China should enter the war on the side of the Allies precisely to obtain favorable treatment after the war.

From Wilson's point of view, however, the case of China was but one of a number of difficult issues facing the Peace Conference and clearly of less importance than the arrangements for the former Austro-Hungarian Empire or the League of Nations. The spread of Bolshevism alarmed Wilson as much as it did the other Allied leaders; indeed, with the destruction of the Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov empires, a new world order was emerging. But while the conference concentrated on Europe, nations under imperialist domination were protesting about their status—not only China, but also Egypt, India, Turkey, and Southeast Asia. In so far as even imperialism required a degree of legitimacy, the War seriously damaged the West's
posturing as the font of civilization. The West's own self-confidence was damaged as well. If the finest flowers of European civilization were dedicated to their mutual destruction, by what logic could the imperialists claim to rule "backward people" for their own good?

One of the Powers' more important tasks in 1918 was to find a place for Japan, which both criticized the old European order and was eager to join it. Japan's role in the war had been relatively minor, but its military presence in the western Pacific was major. Its diplomacy had been instrumental in convincing the Beijing regime to declare war on Germany. And it intended to inherit not just Shandong but also the German islands scattered over the Pacific. Following Allied distress over the Bolshevik Revolution and Russia's withdrawal from the war, Japan joined the invasion of Siberia, sending, like the United States, 7,000 troops in July 1918, but soon expanding these tenfold. Although the British, French, and US contingents retreated from Russia in 1920, Japanese troops remained until 1922. Unsoaked by much actual warfare, Japan's economy and military had benefited enormously from World War I. It became a creditor nation; it sold munitions to the Allies and expanded in the civilian markets throughout Asia that Europe could no longer supply; its international trade, manufacturing, and high-tech industries grew; and, most dramatically, its shipbuilding rose from 85,000 tons in 1914 to 650,000 tons in 1919. Britain, France, and Italy had signed secret treaties with Japan in 1917 promising to support Japan's claims to Shandong. Japan made these treaties public as the Peace Conference opened in 1919; they came as a shock to the Chinese people, and put additional pressure on the United States not to upset what had already been agreed.

President Wilson had recognized the government of Yuan Shikai in 1913, and hence the successor Beijing regimes, as the Republic of China. Wilson's vision of the post-war era was a kind of continuation of the Open Door policy, which had been designed with British support to maintain Chinese territorial integrity at the turn of the century. Naked colonialism would be replaced by free trade, with American businessmen spreading throughout the world on the same basis as those of other countries. Backward nations would not be allowed to keep their raw materials and would be brought into the world economy. But they were to retain political independence and presumably would benefit in the long run. Chinese in 1918 therefore logically looked to Wilson for support in their struggle against Japan's more colonial brand of imperialism.

Early in 1918 Wilson made his famous Fourteen Points speech, responding to the Bolshevik critique of imperialism. The Leninist call for national independence was matched by action. As Japan had secret treaties with the European Powers, so it had with Czarist Russia. But in February 1918 the Bolsheviks revealed and denounced Japanese–Russian agreements from 1907 to 1917 that had been designed to carve up Manchuria and Mongolia. Chinese public opinion was enormously heartened by this gesture, though in fact the Soviet Union kept some rights in Manchuria through secret treaties (unknown to the Chinese people). Wilson's response was more nuanced, but his calls for open diplomacy and respect for the wishes of national peoples were clear enough. Chinese especially looked to his fifth point:

A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined.10

This was cautiously phrased, but the Chinese had no difficulty interpreting nineteenth-century treaty provisions as inequitable. In any case, Wilson added, "An evident principle runs through the whole program I have outlined. It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak."11 However, Wilsonian liberalism was anathema to nations with colonial empires to refurbish in the post-war period, and the United States was not prepared to press these principles. National sovereignty coexisted with a belief in economic expansion that was to be peaceful if possible but coercive if necessary. Hence Wilson's second and third points of 1918: freedom of navigation, and "The removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions..."12 Imperialism, to Wilson, meant colonies and spheres of influence; economic relations could not, by definition, constitute imperialism. Loans and foreign ownership of China's railroads, mines, factories, and the like were, as opposed to imperialism, in the open door tradition. But on the ground in China, foreign ownership of mines and railroads and the stationing of foreign troops around the mines and along the railroads came as a single package.

In any case, Chinese indebtedness to Japan compromised its position at Versailles. In 1917 Japan's policy was to influence the government of Duan Qirui through financial aid. Duan received the Nishihara loans, eventually totaling 145 million yen, of which only 5 million yen was ever repaid, in return for important concessions. Japan was granted the right to station troops in northern Manchuria and Mongolia; provisions were made for military cooperation (targeted against Bolshevik Russia), and Japanese began to train the Chinese army and navy. The deal helped Duan consolidate his control of the parliament and governmental administration, and beef up his military resistance to the southern warlords and Sun Yat-sen. As well, Shandong railroads had been mortgaged in return for Japanese loans, and Ambassador Zhang Zongxiang (later beaten by students on 4 May, 1919) wrote in September 1918 that the Chinese government "gladly agreed" to Japanese demands to station troops in the Shandong cities of Qingdao and Jinan and along the province's railroads. These were among the documents Japan made public at Versailles.

Wilson, however sympathetic to the Chinese case, faced skeptical allies and a Japan that was still feeling its way into the world of Great Powers. Japan's efforts to get the conference to endorse the concept of racial equality
were rebuffed. This might have been a harmless declaration with no legal force, but Australia and the US feared it would encourage immigration from Asia. Shandong might be regarded as a way to mollify the Japanese. Wilson also desperately wanted Japan to join the League of Nations. It might finally be noted that US–Japan trade was far larger than US–China trade, while for Japan—but not for the United States—China was strategically as well as economically important. Ironically, Japan formally returned Shandong to China just three years later in 1922, though the Japanese retained an interest as holders of Chinese bonds to pay for the Shandong railway and other improvements.

Thus in the 1920s the “open door” was more or less honored, and the situation remained fairly stable with no major grabs for territory until the end of the decade. Japan’s leaders were, for a time, in agreement with the American vision of a world capitalist economy. This is also to say, however, that Chinese nationalist demands were continually thwarted. “Wilsonian liberalism” thus indicates the real power of democratic ideas but also the crippling hypocrisy of Western imperialism. World War I damaged the reputation of the West in China as intellectuals like Liang Qichao, never more a traditionalist than at this moment, questioned Western values and urged a return to older Confucian norms. Chinese judged the West by its own standards and condemned it. The dilemma of Wilsonian liberalism was that it could neither sanction the status quo nor end imperialism.

At the turn of the century, Chinese intellectuals had feared dismemberment of China. Chinese still feared the demise of their nation in the 1920s. The May Fourth movement reflected a sophisticated analysis of the situation: imperialism was not simply a threat from foreigners. A large part of China’s problem was domestic, both structurally and in terms of leadership. Thus the students chanted, “Externally, resist the Powers; internally, throw out the traitors.” The 1911 revolutionaries had blamed the Manchus but in 1919 it was clear the traitors were Chinese. At the same time, foreigners who came not as imperialists but as friends could be treated as friends. The philosophers John Dewey of the United States and Bertrand Russell of Britain, for example, conducted wildly popular lecture tours between 1919 and 1921. That both men were politically progressive added to their allure. The May Fourth analysis benefited from the failures of 1911; politics alone did not hold the answer. And within the political realm, if organizational breakthroughs took some further time to work out, radicals none the less realized that they had to bring the masses into politics, to carry politics to the streets.

The political significance of the May Fourth movement

Less than 30 years separated May Fourth radicalism from late Qing radicalism. If the older generation had received a thoroughly Confucian education, the younger generation that took to the streets in 1919 were attending high schools and universities with largely Westernized curriculums. The two generations did not necessarily speak the same political language. Whereas some of the older generation had reacted strongly against their Confucian upbringing, some of the younger generation were more relaxed about the burdens of tradition. (When we speak of “generations” here, we are speaking of people sometimes just a few years apart in age. This sense of generational identity reflected the rapidity of cultural change.) Moreover, important continuities marked not just the ideas, but also the organizing strategies of the May Fourth protestors. Much of the shift from late Qing to May Fourth consciousness reflected what teachers passed on to their students. By 1919 Beida was staffed with many men who had been anti-Qing revolutionaries—including its president, Cai Yuanpei.

Western historians have sometimes found Chinese nationalism, like all nationalisms, prone to xenophobia—a matter of ignorance and reaction rather than the pride of a people in itself. In this view, imperialism, no matter how brutal, is cosmopolitan in that it inevitably links and influences different civilizations. However, in the 1920s it is Chinese nationalism that looks cosmopolitan. The student and merchant nationalists were educated, reasonable, knowledgeable about the world, interested in universal values and ideals, and spoke the language of progress and enlightenment. It is Western and Japanese imperialism that appears narrow-minded, ignorant, and racist, and still relying on the gunboat, not on reason. It is important to remember that imperialism was not merely a set of abstract questions about the economic impact of cotton imports or the British–American Tobacco Company. Rather, it was a lived experience.

In the countryside, missionaries had become notorious for interfering in lawsuits and other disputes between neighbors—especially if one party was Christian and the other not. Many ordinary Chinese would have been familiar with numerous stories such as the following. In 1902 two British missionaries settled in Chenzhou, in western Hunan, and established a church and a hospital. A cholera epidemic spread and people said the missionaries’ housekeeper had put white powder in the town well. A crowd of two thousand assembled to accuse her and the missionaries of poisoning the well, and events escalated to the point the two missionaries were beaten to death. The British consulate in Hankou then demanded that the community and local officials be punished. They even demanded that a fourteen-year-old waiter be executed after he was seen kicking one of the corpses. The Qing dismissed its officials and arrested three hundred people. Ten were executed, and others died in jail.

In the cities, the ubiquitous presence of foreign soldiers and sailors, often out for a good time, led to numerous disputes. If Chinese were killed in a drunken brawl, the foreign perpetrators would be punished but lightly and a bit of compensation given to the deceased’s family. In Shanghai in 1904, for example, two drunken Russian sailors hired rickshaws to take them back to their boats. When one of the rickshaw pullers demanded his fare, one of the sailors lost his temper, grabbed an adze from a nearby carpenter and,
instead of killing the rickshaw puller, crushed the skull of a passing pedestrian. The Russian authorities, insisting on their extraterritorial rights, tried the case themselves. Remarkably, they found the sailor guilty of “quite accidental” negligent homicide, since he killed someone other than the intended victim, and he was sentenced to four years’ hard labor.

Such incidents only multiplied as the years went on, and all sorts of different political groups found common cause in anti-imperialism. No Shanghai park really boasted a sign saying “No dogs or Chinese,” but that most Chinese had no trouble believing that such a sign existed shows their understanding of imperialism as a lived experience. (Some parks however did prohibit Chinese, except for servants accompanying their employers.) The point here is that the popularity of the May Fourth movement and the respect given students had everything to do with imperialism. The movement brought political and policy questions once reserved for elite discussion into popular urban discourse. The students managed not only to shake the government, but also to introduce China to a new kind of politics. Street politics also expanded the old political world dominated by literati, warlords, administrators, and professional politicians. The May Fourth movement might be compared to the petition drive organized by Kang Youwei in 1895. Simply by moving political considerations into wider view, both acted as radicalizing forces. Kang turned to fellow literati. The May Fourth self-consciously turned to “the people.” In 1919, even Kang – by now generally conservative – praised the students, noting that “No real public opinion or real people’s rights have been seen in China in the eight years since the establishment of the Republic in 1912; if they exist today, it is due to the students’ actions in this incident.” The excitement and danger in 1919 were far greater than in the relatively sedate protest of 1895; rumors variously had soldiers moving down students on the streets and moving to overthrow the government with their student allies. But as young literati demanded to be heard in 1895, so the idea of citizenship was seized in 1919. Fifteen-year-old girls claimed the right to discuss policy and to speak in the name of the nation. Public speech was a right, not a privilege.

The students were not always in harmony, of course, and continued militancy through June lost them the support of teachers who wanted classes to resume. None the less, in China’s major cities, students took to street preaching; this was a highly organized movement of reaching out to the urban populace. Groups of students were assigned to exhort merchants and shoppers to boycott Japanese goods. Students spoke with the authority of those who were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the community. They also inherited some of the traditional prestige of the scholar. In Shanghai, at least, students moved to enforce the boycott of Japanese goods. Not all Chinese businessmen benefited from the boycott; many shopkeepers lost sales and had to be convinced not to cheat. Students feared violence since it would bring a sharp reaction from the foreign police forces, and they tried very hard to maintain order. Having preached hatred for the Japanese, students then had to dissuade crowds from attacking Japanese nationals, as sometimes occurred.

Overall the movement was peaceful and disciplined, even solemn. Student demonstrations were dedicated to the memory of martyrs killed by the police, and students swore to save the nation. The appeal of the students lay in their message and also in their conduct. Their claims to be acting selflessly were critical to their legitimacy. This was thus a politics of purity as well as a new kind of street politics. The great difference between the multi-class student movement and the machinations of warlords and politicians was thus clear. Students wrote slogans in their own blood. Students reinforced their sense of purpose by taking oaths creating rules for themselves. Even Chinese who disagreed with some of the students’ demands and tactics might admire their sincerity.

This sort of politics did have a precedent. The racist immigration policies of the United States had been the target of a brief but effective student-merchant boycott in 1905. And in 1915 Yuan Shikai’s government had briefly attempted to use popular protest as a tool for resisting the Twenty-one Demands. Student strikes, demonstrations, and mass meetings were rooted in the anti-Manchu movement from the beginning of the century. More fundamentally, the students’ sense of their own righteousness stemmed from the same tradition of literati dissent and responsibility for governance that had motivated Kang Youwei. If we compare the role of students in 1911 and their role in 1919, it may thus seem that little had changed. But quantitatively the May Fourth movement involved unprecedented numbers: tens of thousands of students and workers and thousands of merchants across China’s major cities. And “qualitatively” the May Fourth movement led to a new basis for political activity. Perhaps this reflected the changes in Chinese society in the first two decades of the century more than it did a growing maturity of political understanding, though this, too, played a role. For if the 1911 Revolution saw a temporary alliance between radical intellectuals and students, provincial leaders, and military bosses, the May Fourth movement created a multi-class political agenda based on anti-imperialism and opposition to venal Chinese administrations.

And May Fourth set the pattern for future protests as it trained future leaders. Strikes continued periodically through the next three decades; student mobilization was permanent, and huge reservoirs of sympathy for the students were maintained. The May Fourth movement brought thousands of people to treat policy questions as personally important. Some of them doubtless did not stay politicized, but many did. They had to move away from pure protest movements, which by their very nature are of the moment. A variety of long-term approaches was thus formed. Of particular importance was the independent political party, not attached to a warlord faction but dedicated to overthrowing the entire system of militarism. The Nationalist and the Communist Parties will be discussed in Chapter 10, but
the point here is that they could not have emerged without the May Fourth movement. The 1920s saw a process not just of politicization but of political professionalization. Professional politicians—the old parliamentarians—were to the May Fourth movement nearly as despotic as the warlords. But a new kind of politician was emerging, one devoted to a cause and representing the expansion of politics. He (or, in increasing numbers, she) was not revolutionary in the 1911 model; rather, the new Party member, even if he or she worked underground, was dedicated to the long-term quest for social stability.

The May Fourth movement represents a politically unfinished project, for it left unresolved several questions. Street demonstrations were a potent but ultimately limited technique. One might influence the government, but only to shift its stance on a specific policy or to implement specific, minor reforms. One might conceivably join a government, but would one then simply become embroiled in the machinations of the warlord system? One might want to overthrow the whole system, but how? And would the chaos of revolution only make things worse, as 1911 seemed to show?

The purely political approach of the 1911 Revolution had failed to reform China fundamentally; the purely cultural approach of the 1915 New Culture Movement had failed or was too slow. May Fourth merged cultural and political issues and strategies. By the early 1920s the nascent Nationalist and Communist Parties had captured a good part of the enthusiasm kindled by the May Fourth explosion. Before these ideologically-charged political parties can be examined, however, we must first look at the intellectual and cultural changes of the period.

Cultural revolution and social change

One of the dominant themes of the May Fourth era was women’s rights. The attempt to turn women into active citizens can be traced back to the late Qing, of course, but only in the wake of the spread of educational and employment opportunities did women begin to emerge as a major social force in their own right. Conservatives who wished to limit women to the private sphere of the home opposed the women’s movement. Deep-seated attitudes toward gender differences also prevented the desire for “complete equality” from reaching its potential. Legal reforms were slow to come and social change even slower. But the 1920s saw women’s issues—from free marriages to career opportunities—begin to permeate May Fourth discourse.

Much of this discourse remained dominated by men’s voices. Mao Zedong, in an early (non-Marxist) essay of 1919 calling for the unity of the Chinese people, spoke for the main groups he wished to see mobilized: students, workers, and peasants. And for women, he spoke in this way:

We are women. We are even more deeply immersed in an ocean of suffering. We are also human beings, so why won’t they let us take part in politics?... in social intercourse?... The shameless men, the villainous men, make us into their playthings, and force us to prostitute ourselves to them indefinitely. The devils, who destroy the freedom to love... so-called “chastity” is confined to us women.... All day long they talk about something called being “a worthy mother and a good wife.” What is this but teaching us to prostitute ourselves indefinitely to the same man?17

Mao also drew national attention to a local Hunan woman’s suicide in 1919. Mao wrote a series of articles claiming that Miss Zhao had been forced into committing suicide by parents who insisted she marry against her will. She had hidden a razor in her foot bindings, and while she was being carried in the bridal sedan to her husband’s house for the formal wedding, she slit her throat. Mao blamed an immoral marriage system, concluding: “Because the causes of Miss Zhao’s suicide lie in society itself, such a society is dangerous.”18 In this way Miss Zhao became a revolutionary martyr for women’s rights.

We may not know exactly what the real Miss Zhao thought or how despair and power were combined in her suicide, but some women did possess voices of their own. In the wake of the 1911 Revolution, the refusal of so-called revolutionaries to support women’s suffrage led a number of women to call the liberation of women “unfinished business.” Some educated women found that writing could be liberating. Chen Xuezao (1906–91) recalled that, by sending her first essay to a Shanghai newspaper, she was not only challenging the authority of her strict family but also discovering the possibility of making an independent living through her writing.19 Chen was able to finance her Ph.D. studies in France and resist her parents’ pressures to get married. Perhaps the most famous woman author of the May Fourth period was Ding Ling (1904–86), who daringly wrote about women’s sexuality, but she was by no means alone in exploring the dilemmas facing liberated and liberated women alike.20 Male authors tended to write realistic fiction while much women’s writing was autobiographical and introspective. But women writers in the May Fourth period had no choice but to consider the problem of how to be a modern woman.

What is particularly striking about the works written by women—although of course they differed widely in tone and political commitment—is that, in contrast to male feminists, they presented women neither as completely powerless nor as satisfied with the freedoms of the new society. Ding Ling’s Miss Sophie’s Diary tells the story of a woman, not entirely unlike Ding Ling herself, who was free of the traditional patriarchal family—and yet still restless and unhappy. A number of women wrote full-scale autobiographies or semi-autobiographies about growing up and escaping from traditional families. Xiao Hong (1911–42), for example, had been sent away to school but ran away from home when her father demanded she marry the man of his choice. When she moved in with a teacher from her school, they were both expelled and forced to move to Beijing—where she abandoned
her. Her fiction seemingly deals with issues that had occurred in her life, such as the story “Abandoned Child” about a woman forced to give up her child. “What will I do? I have no home, no friends. Where can I go? There’s only that man I’ve just met and he’s homeless too!” In the story “Separation,” written as a letter from a young woman to her lover, we see the woman literally locked up by her mother until her arranged marriage to another man can take place. The story was written by the younger sister of the philosopher and historian Feng Youlan, whose mother was actually more supportive of her children. Her story was considered shocking upon its publication in 1923 due to its portrayal of romance between unmarried persons. Today it is the story’s feverish expressions of love and political consciousness that seem more striking. “I have discovered that humans are selfish; although they make material sacrifices for others, they have no spiritual regard for them because they are so trapped in their historical circumstances.” Perhaps few women accepted the utopian visions of male radicals unquestioningly. What fates would most young women face without the support of their families?

Lu Xun’s stories offered more nuanced portrayals of the dilemmas facing young men and women who wanted to be the New Man and, especially, the New Woman. One of Lu’s stories tells of a man who would like to teach science and other modern subjects but can only get a job teaching the old Confucian morality—a quiet tragedy for a man who once dreamed of changing the world.

During the May Fourth era the dramas of Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, had an influential vogue. A Doll’s House was translated in 1918, and the play about Nora walking out of her comfortable but confining family—leaving behind husband and children—provoked admiring discussions about free love, contraception, and divorce. Few women could survive without family support, but some like Ding Ling did have the support of their mothers (Ding Ling’s mother also unbound her own feet) and others had the support of friends and colleagues. But the prospect of hundreds of naïve girls launching themselves ill-prepared into Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities prompted Lu Xun to give a talk at a women’s college: “What happens after Nora leaves home?”

That was a hard question to answer, but it was not just young women students who were seeing their personal problems in political terms. The “Women’s Question” that dominated so much of May Fourth discourse was part of a larger attack on the traditional family. Essentially, the family was charged with suppressing individual rights and the dynamic energies needed to revitalize China. The family represented everything that was the opposite of modern, scientific, and democratic. Companionate marriage, as the historian John Fitzgerald points out, not only subverted the patriarchal lineage but also demanded that lovers make a consciously chosen commitment to stick to one another through thick and thin to build an “affective community”—rather like the relationship between citizen and nation. In sum, what happened in the May Fourth period is that these abstractions became painfully concrete for the younger generation of educated students. And older intellectuals like Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Li Dazhao, who had all contracted arranged marriages with relatively educated, even footbound women, had to decide what to do about their first wives. Divorce? Affairs? Fidelity? Among the students many a bombastic attack on patriarchy was penned anonymously so the author’s father would not be angry or hurt.

Qu Qiubai (1899–1955), a literary critic and early Communist leader, recalled that his irresponsible father had fretted away the family patrimony and left his mother to raise six children. Taunted by relatives, she committed suicide and the family was dispersed. For Lu Xun, the family was society’s agent of cannibalism, devouring its own children. In one of Fu Sinian’s first published essays he wrote that the family was “the source of all evil.” Fu had himself been married when he was fifteen.

The enormous burden of the family makes it totally impossible for a Chinese person to pursue his own vocation. It pushes him, bit by bit, toward immorality… Alas! Such is the benefit of the Chinese family system: it forces you to become a provider, it makes you middle-headed, it forces you to submit yourself to others and lose your identity. The May Fourth also brought the entire New Culture movement to the provinces—to young provincials like Mao Zedong in Hunan or the boys of Hangzhou. Students enrolled in the Zhejiang Provincial First Normal School in Hangzhou fervently joined the May Fourth demonstrators. While Hangzhou itself was no backwater, the most radical students tended to come from rural counties far from the modernizing reach of Shanghai. From a poor peasant family, Shi Cunlong (1899–1970), for example, became an enthusiastic iconoclast. On Confucius’ birthday in the autumn of 1919, First Normal students refused to worship at the Confucian temple but made a pilgrimage to the tomb of the anarchist Liu Shifu instead, toppled the statue of Confucius on campus. Shi wrote an article “Against Filial Piety!” to attack the most central value of the Confucian tradition.

Like Qu Qiubai, Shi created an intellectual position out of an existential dilemma. Visiting home back in the countryside in the fall of 1919, he discovered that his mother appeared to be dying, though the family had sought help from an herbalist and from the gods. His father—who mostly remembered as beating him as a child—demanded that the family’s resources be saved for her funeral, in accordance with Confucian ritual propriety. Shi suggested they seek further medical advice; his dilemma was that his filial duties to his mother included providing her with care while his filial duties to his father demanded obedience. His reaction was to flee back to Hangzhou, later claiming: “It was too late to try saving my mother. I thereupon resolved to save all other women who in the future might find themselves in similar circumstances.”
Previously, though exposed to the ardent attacks on Confucianism by the likes of Chen Duxiu, Shi had rejected them. But over the course of the May Fourth movement he was convinced of the evil of Confucianism by intellectual argument, by his reading of China’s predicaments, and by existential pain. Shi attacked filial piety as the ethics of slaves and directly denounced his own father. At the same time, he noted that both his parents had been trapped in a society and a cultural system imposed on them without their consent. Instead, Shi proposed, an anarchism system without private property to divide people from one another would suppress patriarchy and other evils. The historian Wen-hsiu Yeh notes that, in contrast to the more political concerns of Beijing and Shanghai intellectuals with the influence of Confucianism on state ideology, “provincials” like Shi focused on the family and society, “Although the metropolitan articulation paved the way and revealed the patterns of connection between ideology and various aspects of social reality, Hangzhou iconoclast, charged by a rage and a fervor emanating from middle-county traditional rural society, selectively displayed intensity in certain areas over others and was no pale reflection of metropolitan input.”

In sum, attacks on the family were fueled by the desire on the parts of thousands of young and sometimes not-so-young educated men and women to build their own lives, be granted a chance at self-fulfillment, and reform China. Many saw themselves as heroes. For some, this led to an extreme romanticism and subjectivism. The literary scholar Leo Ou-fan Lee cites young writers who threw off Confucian rationalism and classical standards in search of an aesthetics that linked human sentiment and dynamism to love, truth, beauty, and freedom. These romantics glorified emotionalism, and their touching agonies filled many a literary journal. Calling for “art for art’s sake” and sometimes glorifying “decadence,” the romantic movement was often criticized as escapists and had largely dissipated by the end of the decade. Perhaps the new political commitments of the 1930s left little room for the extreme individualism of the romantics, but the writer Yu Dafu showed how romantic and political impulses could be mixed: “Since last winter my emotional frame of mind has been a continuous series of depressions. I have harbored the idea of going to Russia in order to become a worker there, but I was stopped by my brother in Beijing... Living in this world, one has to do something. But for such a superfluous man like me, castrated by advanced education, what can I do?”

The “superfluous man” may seem to take us far from the desire to participate in the making of a new China, but the romantics’ criticism of the status quo was as harsh as that of the political activists. We should probably think less of classifying May Fourth trends into distinct activist, romantic, culturalist schools, and more in terms of a set of possibilities and pressures. Indeed, Marxists of the 1920s such as Li Dazhao, Qu Qiubai – and the historian and literary figure Guo Moruo (1892–1978) – shared a belief in reality as organic and vital. Such views were popular in the wake of World War I, associated with the popular philosopher Henri Bergson. Along with Daoism and Buddhism, this resulted in a faith in the empathic commonality of life into which individuals must surrender themselves. Before his conversion to Marxism, Guo wrote in 1922:

Panthecism is atheism. If all natural phenomena are manifestations of God, and I also am a manifestation of God, then I am God, and all natural phenomena are manifestations of me. When a man has lost his self and become one with God, he transcends time and space and sees life and death as one. But when a man becomes aware of his self, he sees only the alternation and inconsistency of the external appearance of the myriad phenomena of the universe and of his own external appearance, and a feeling of sorrow about life and death, being and non-being is born within him.

From this empathy with the universe – so like Kang Youwei’s youthful awakening forty years earlier – Guo drew activist conclusions: “With the same energy with which a lion strikes its prey, with the whole body and the whole soul, one must seek self-realization in the fulfillment of every moment.” This might be called mystical activism rather than mystical escapism.

The modern nation and limits of change
What remained of May Fourth ideals once the demonstrations petered out? Warlords and – often standing behind them in the shadows – the foreign powers dominated politics. Urban society was illiberal and increasingly consumerist, while rural society seemed not to change at all. Nationalist trends – with their tendency toward self-glorification of the group, silencing of dissent, anti-cosmopolitanism, and demands for unity – could repress movements for democracy and cultural criticism. This was not a dilemma unique to China, of course. However, the anti-traditionalism of the leaders of the New Culture movement was especially strong, which left them vulnerable to charges of “cultural treason.” When competing and complementary needs for national unity, social justice, and democracy and individualism are openly debated, a balance may be struck. But the issues may not be openly debated. Something of this kind of subliminal discourse affected the “Women’s Question” in May Fourth China.

For just as radicals proposed the equality of women, they could not escape a larger discourse in which femininity was associated with weakness and national disgrace, while masculine qualities of aggressiveness and bravery were associated with national salvation. Women were increasingly expected to act like men – up to a point. Moreover, Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and other radicals directly attacked the effeminate “pale-faced scholar.” China was criticized as decadent and degenerate. The “race” itself had been degenerating for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. Attacks on
polygamy and concubinage might be made in terms of individual rights, but they were also said to weaken the race. The double standard whereby men were allowed multiple partners, it was said, spread syphilis. Eugenics became a popular cause. "Race betterment" would be achieved through monogamous marriage between healthy partners. Castration and feminization became metaphors for the fate of the nation.

Prostitution and also homosexuality became symbols of China's ills. Both were outside of legal marriage and neither contributed to procreation and the advancement of the nation. The International Settlement of Shanghai alone was estimated to provide employment for 70,000 prostitutes, servicing the increasing numbers of unattached male workers. In the hygienic version of Chinese nationalism, both female lust and male excess weakened the individual and therefore the nation. This was not entirely a new idea. Female sexuality had been tightly regulated by law and custom during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Male sexuality, on the other hand, was given some scope outside of the needs of the patriline. Traditional elites tended not to distinguish "homosexual" and "heterosexual" categories of behavior, individual preference, or personality types. Rather, the more fundamental sexual categories were the active penetrant and the passive penetrated, who could be either women or men (boys). The penetrated male was analogized to a female, as younger and lower in the hierarchy. Thus society made room for a master sodomizing a servant, a military officer a soldier, and an older man a youth. No special shame attached to the active partner, though the Qing even consensual homosexual acts were illegal. There was also something of a tradition of adolescent male lovers (less is known about lesbianism), though boys of good families would certainly be expected to take wives and eventually become family heads in their own right.

Such attitudes changed radically in the twentieth century. Following the Western medicalization of homosexuality, progressive Chinese associated it with the decadence of the old culture. Homosexuality was for the first time medicalized as an aberration or mental illness. It became the modern, healthy view to require the rehabilitation of prostitutes and homosexuals. As prostitution could spread syphilis literally, so homosexuality was conceived as spreading "like syphilis" from its unnatural haunts in armies, monasteries, and the male brothels.

The new "scientific" sexual discourse ended the Qing's obsession with female chastity, creating in its stead a basic norm of legitimate sex within the nuclear family. The husband was expected to penetrate his wife; both were expected to behave with fidelity. But this norm remained far from the equality and liberation sought by some women. For women remained tied to their role in the family as wife and mother, while the role of father and husband included the public realm as well. Both traditional cosmology and modern biology treated men as inherently active and women as passive.

Political activists proclaimed that a strong, modern nation needed healthy, modern sexual attitudes. Yet did sexual practices really change?
9 National identity, Marxism, and social justice

By the 1920s the relationship between intellectuals and society had been transformed. "Scholars" were no longer a status group marked by their mastery of sacred or classical texts and eligibility for official posts. Instead, a new term for intellectuals, "knowledgeable elements," signaled that they had become a specialized professional group. They no longer claimed a special relationship with the imperial center, but they did identify themselves with the modern nation. Their self-appointed task was to create new narratives of the nation, of the Chinese people moving through time, of the cultural essence, of Chinese historical destiny. Indeed, many possessed a heroic self-image appropriate for those who would awake the sleeping masses, revive what had become moribund and decadent, and help create a new world. But exactly what could intellectuals contribute to a society in violent flux, facing rapacious forces within and without, and populated by farmers whose ways had not fundamentally changed in centuries?

The burden of the past lay heavily on the new intellectuals. The New Culture movement had, of course, largely rejected the past, particularly everything that could be labeled "Confucian," as dead weight, authoritarian, anti-scientific, anti-democratic, and inherently and unreflectively conservative. This view led into the Chinese Marxist critique of the class nature of Confucianism in the 1920s and 1930s. Marxists condemned Confucianism as the ideology of the feudal landlord class, an ideology that justified exploitation of the peasantry under a false guise of paternalism and a hegemonic ideology that promoted "false consciousness" by trying to convince peasants and workers that they deserved their cruel fate.

What was the role of Confucianism in the twentieth century? It is sometimes said that China's intellectuals were in search of a new orthodoxy to replace the lost certainties of their ancestors. As Confucianism had provided an orthodoxy that seemed to answer all questions, so, finally, Marxism came to the fore as a similarly complete ideology. The content was different but the social functions were similar. In its crudest form, this theory argues continuity in content as well: from the "oriental despotism" of the imperial age to the communist despotism of the Maoist years. Obviously, this assumes that Marxism is somehow better fitted to become orthodoxy than anarchism, liberalism, or other worldviews that attracted many intellectuals—a proposition that needs proving. A more fundamental problem is that no examination of China's twentieth century can accept the idea that there was any kind of simple route away from the imperial age. Even the briefest glance at Chinese intellectuals shows a complex search for truth, not a willful seeking for new orthodoxies. None the less, as historian Joseph Levenson pointed out, "the appearance of survivals [of tradition in Communist China] is by no means just a trick of the eye." However, "many bricks of the old structure are still around— but not the structure."

Intellectuals were searching for living truths relevant to social reality. This perhaps reflected the major part of the Confucian tradition that emphasized practice, not the metaphysical, eternal truth of the Platonic tradition. It explains the enormous appeal of liberalism in the form of Deweyan pragmatism as well as Marxism. Indeed, another problem with the view that Marxism represented little more than new wine in the old bottles of orthodoxy is that Confucianism demanded relatively little in the way of ideological commitment. And whatever the appeal of orthodoxies under certain circumstances, the rapid unraveling of Chinese Marxism at the close of the twentieth century demonstrated that there is no special Chinese affinity for orthodoxy.

None the less, if the Confucian heritage little affected the content of the new thought, it may have shaped the ways intellectuals conceived their task. The historian Lin Yü-sheng has pointed out that the very totalism of the New Culture attack on Confucianism (that there was nothing of value whatsoever, that it had to be eradicated completely) reflected a traditional approach to cultural questions. In particular, the faith that correct intellectual formations will lead to correct actions reflected Confucian epistemology, in Lin's view. The May Fourth generation, too, believed that it was necessary and possible to formulate correct ideas, which would meet all needs. The idea that even the most iconoclastic critics of tradition were still affected by that tradition on some level is at once ironic and unsurprising. Yet it is not clear that iconoclasm really describes mainstream thought. Iconoclasts like Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun, and Hu Shi certainly constructed powerful critiques of tradition, critiques that dominated the New Culture movement and continued to influence ideologies through the May Fourth movement and into the 1930s and beyond—but also critiques that were challenged in many ways. Quite a few intellectuals were roughly "Confucian" in their emphasis on personal morality and their faith that good individuals could serve as models for the community.

For all their eloquence, the iconoclasts cannot command all our attention. Given the variety of intellectual responses to China's problems, including efforts to reshape Confucianism, the roles of tradition should be sought fortuitously and in unexpected places. Given the existential dilemmas facing intellectuals, their spiritual quests should not be neglected. It is also important to remember that, although Marxism came eventually
to dominate intellectual life, only a small minority of intellectuals actually converted to Marxism between 1920 and 1949. Therefore, the intellectual history of the May Fourth era should not be devoted entirely to explaining the triumph of Marxism.

Finally, another approach to the problem of tradition suggests that new ideas from the West were attractive because they offered solutions to old problems. In other words, Confucianism had set the terms in which the new thought would be placed. The historian Thomas Metzger posits that the Neo-Confucian tradition stemming back to the eleventh century had reached a kind of impasse by the eighteenth century. Individuals were supposed to pursue sagehood, but in practice they could neither perfect themselves nor lead society to its proper state. This led to intense anxieties, so “the developing Chinese decision at the turn of our century to modernize was not simply based on the discovery that certain Western methods were superior to native ones. Rather, these Western methods proved enormously appealing just because they seemed useful for solving agonizing problems and realizing social ideals with which Confucians had long been preoccupied.” That is, the West’s science and technology, its economic growth, and its ability to turn subjects into citizens seemed to meet traditional Chinese goals. Thus, “to a large extent, it was the indigenous, intense, centuries-old desire to escape from a metaphysical, psychological, political, and economic predicament which led many Chinese enthusiastically to devote their lives to the overthrow of traditionally revered institutions and the adoption of strange and foreign ways.”

This view contrasts with that of the early German sociologist Max Weber, who postulated that Confucianism had reduced the tension between ideal and reality to a minimum, and so lacked the transformative impulse and capacity that he saw in Protestantism. However, Metzger’s interpretation supports the basic Weberian view of a China unable to change; both views make Western thought into an instrumentality. The problem is that this account remains reductionist: persons trying to think through problems merely fill out a schema beyond their design. Confucians were neither in such a predicament as Metzger suggests, nor was there such continuity in goals as he suggests. By no means did the Confucian essence emerge unchanged from the encounter with Western categories of thought. Nor, obviously, did the new intellectuals mean it to. Like the literati of old, the modern Chinese intelligentsia sought order, but it was a very different order. Nationalism, citizenship (political participation of the masses), progress and evolutionism, egalitarianism, the glorification of struggle: such goals represent major discontinuity with the past. We must take them seriously.

None the less, these attempts to make sense of Chinese intellectuals trying to make sense of their world offer insights that this chapter will attempt to assess. Overall, the May Fourth intellectuals may be divided into the usual suspects: liberals (or moderates), conservatives, and radicals. This division is somewhat anachronistic but certainly historically justified. We cannot give absolute definitions of what, say, a “conservative” is, but the three tendencies can be seen in relation to one another. Of course, there were debates and deep internal divisions within the groups as well as the overlapping contacts and themes between them. It is useful to distinguish between politics and culture—a given intellectual might be culturally conservative but politically reformist (Liang Shuming). Others were fairly conservative politically but wanted radical cultural change (Hu Shi). And by no means did “conservatism” imply opposition to all change. But such labels provide a convenient introduction to the range of intellectual possibilities. To sort out the intellectual trends of the May Fourth period, this chapter will examine three debates. First, the “problems versus isms” debate, beginning in 1919, which did much to distinguish political liberalism and radicalism, and in a sense marks the emergence of Marxism. Second, the “science versus metaphysics” debate of 1923 that did much to establish the conservative critique of Westernization. And third, the debate between anarchists and Marxists in the late 1920s, marking the demise of what had previously been highly idealistic forms of radicalism and the victory of Marxism-Leninism as the dominant form of radicalism.

“Problems versus isms” and liberalism versus Marxism-Leninism

The success of the Russian Revolution of 1917, coupled with the disillusionment with Wilsonian liberalism in the wake of the Versailles Treaty, produced preliminary interest in Marxism. Leninism gave Marxism a practical expression it had hitherto lacked in the eyes of Chinese radicals, and the Russian Revolution seemed to prove that it was a workable formula. Conversion to Marxism was slow to develop, and commitment to the discipline of the Marxist-Leninist party even slower, but there was much interest in what appeared to be a successful plan for revolution. Hu Shi, for one, was disturbed by the appeal of Marxism. For all the radicalism of Hu’s attacks on Confucianism, he favored working within the political status quo as much as possible. He continued to believe that the cultural regeneration of the Chinese people had to precede political activism.

Hu Shi therefore tried to discredit Marxism with a plea for pragmatism, or what he preferred to call “experimentalism.” Instead of talking about general theories, abstract propositions—“isms”—people should deal with concrete problems amenable to specific solutions. Factory conditions and women’s rights should be approached separately, for example, and not treated as symptoms of some common, underlying problem. Hu thus wanted to find specific and gradual, even partial, solutions to China’s problems. Reforms, not revolution. He advocated his mentor John Dewey’s approach of using calm, scientific inquiry to solve social problems. Even democracy was simply a matter of practice. “The only way to have democracy is to have democracy.” Hu wrote as early as 1915. Many historians have pointed out the fragility of Hu’s hopes and the weaknesses of liberalism
in the Chinese setting. Reformism implied the existence of a social consensus that in fact still needed to be built. Indeed, by the 1930s Hu’s was a marginal view. Calls for gradualism seemed pusillanimous and calls for calm seemed simply ignorant. Marxism, meanwhile, claimed to be entirely scientific, but not gradualist. Justifiably or not, Hu’s calls for patient optimism seemed to lack a certain sympathy for the horrendous conditions in which so many Chinese found themselves.

None the less, Yan Yangchu (1892–1990) illustrates liberalism’s potential for social reform. Known as Jimmy Yan in the United States, where he received graduate training and maintained sources of support and fundraising, he began his career with the YMCA. Yan was part of the “social gospel” movement of the 1920s, whereby Christian missionaries began spending more time providing social services than worrying about conversions. Spearheaded by the American Protestants who dominated the Chinese missionary scene by this time, effort went into such programs as hospitals, schools, orphanages, career-training for beggars and prostitutes, and sanitation campaigns. Yan worked on literacy programs, vastly enlarging adult education with networks of schools, volunteer teachers, student-teachers, and what can only be called savvy marketing to attract students after their long day’s work. New night school classes might be advertised with marching bands, for example.

Yan’s attention was soon directed toward rural issues, and his organization founded an experimental project in Dingxian, Hebei. There Yan built schools, an agricultural extension program, a health-care system, and farmers’ cooperatives. The Dingxian project did not bring in outside money and experts so much as it mobilized local resources, including the enthusiasm of ordinary villagers. Agricultural reforms, for example, resulted from working closely with local farmers to find appropriate and practical technology; they did not depend on importing costly scientific machines that did not fit local conditions anyway. Yan’s cadres worked closely with farmers to find usable hybrids, fertilizers, breeding techniques, pumps, and insecticides to raise productivity. Cooperatives both to provide credit and to aid marketing were important tools where peasants were often in debt to middlemen. Yan’s dream was to move from educational reforms to economic improvement and local mobilization, to cooperatives to free the farmers from the problems of price manipulation and credit squeeze, to light industrialization, and finally to true village democracy. Indeed, Yan wanted to turn the peasants into full citizens. But local and national political leaders put limits on reform—land distribution was not on the agenda. The new political organs that Yan’s cadres wrote, dealing with such village problems as indebtedness, had to draw back from revolutionary implications lest officials shut them down. So, while audiences might be chanting “kill the usurer,” actors on stage resolved the plot by organizing themselves to hold the usurer for official arrest.

In the eyes of more radical intellectuals, the reformism of Hu and Yan was doomed. Li Dazhao replied to Hu’s critique of “isms.” Li agreed about the need to be concrete, but called for collective action. He abandoned his earlier faith that managers or technicians could solve problems; rather, Li now emphasized a kind of democratic populism. A majority should determine that a problem existed and what course of action to take. And the majority could only do so in the context of its general ideals, out of its “collective sense of dissatisfaction.” Li implied that Hu’s ideas might be suitable for a more advanced society, but in China—subject to warlord misrule and imperialist incursion, fragmented, disorganized, and decaying—a piecemeal approach could not work. Instead, the economic infrastructure presented an opportunity for a fundamental solution. He confessed, “I recognize that my recent discussions have mostly been empty talk [existing only] on paper with little involvement in practical problems. From now on I vow to go out and work in the practical movement.” But Li’s version of pragmatism tied concrete problems to fundamental social reform rather than trying, like Hu, to isolate them. Li believed that once China experienced a social revolution, the remaining particular problems would by and large solve themselves. Li and other radicals were increasingly looking to Leninist Russia as a model of political revolution and nation-building.

Several important issues underlay the debate. One was the question of means versus ends. Hu Shi did not want to get his hands dirty with the compromises and betrayals inherent to political movements. His was a self-avowedly elitist approach where experts would make decisions. Li had vowed to take action, though his vision of political process had more to do with awakening a sleeping nation than the deal-making and saber-rattling of warlordism. Hu did not trust the “people” as Li did; on the other hand, Li was turning away from constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy and adopting something closer to the “general will”—Li imbued the people with something like a mystical single consciousness. Hu’s instrumentalist understanding of democracy would trust educated people to make the correct decision after informed discussion. However, Hu recognized the ignorance and backwardness of the majority of the populace and put his trust in professionalization and administrative expertise. Hu thus held that the exact nature of the regime (warlord or democratic) mattered less for the time being than trying to place competent managers and honest administrators in the civil service. But Hu did not confront the problem of how to assure administration remained responsible to the people. More urgently, he failed to confront the reality of warlord regimes that had neither the interest nor the capability to institute competent administration.

Li Dazhao at least had an answer for the second problem: revolution. Li’s populism—his faith in the people—was extremely important in his turn to Marxism, and continued to shape his understanding of Marxism. After 1919 he saw the Bolshevik world Lenin was creating in Russia as a “workers’ government” that would turn all citizens into workers. Li thought the Russian Revolution would be to the twentieth century what the French Revolution had been to the nineteenth. He rationalized the “dictatorship of
the proletariat" as a brief, transitional phase necessary for the elimination of the bourgeoisie. In a society without classes, government would become a matter of good administration of the popular will rather than an arena of competing interests. Li paid little attention to Lenin’s notion of the vanguard role of the Party, and his basic frame of reference remained more generally socialist or even anarchist. Humanitarianism, mutual aid, community, and equality remained his watchwords. He even hoped, like most radicals, that China could avoid the revolutionary violence of class struggle — or if this was not possible, then class struggle was an unnecessarily necessary means to good ends. How could a man with these views consider himself a Marxist?

At first, Li was more of a commentator than a believer. Working as head librarian at Beida, Li published his views on Russia and his growing knowledge of Marxism, and discussed them with colleagues and students. Mao Zedong, a young graduate from a provincial teachers’ college, worked at the Beida library and came into contact with Li in late 1918. Most of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 and 1922 came out of this environment. They first appreciated its political effectiveness: more Russian Leninism than German Marxism. They also appreciated its analytical powers: how Chinese history and the intrusion of Western imperialism could be understood through the workings of economic forces and class struggle. Actually, China’s early communists remained highly critical of Marxism for what they perceived as its lack of an ethical or humanist dimension. But they drew strength from the Marxist doctrine of “historical materialism” in so far as it placed humans in their society and tried to understand them as social beings. Li Dazhao recontextualized history as a story of progress fueled by struggle. And he consistently favored a voluntarist approach to Marxism, emphasizing not the economic forces that shape individual destinies but rather focusing on how humans were largely free to determine their own history. As a philosophy, voluntarism emphasizes the role of the will.

The same time, the intellectuals were often baffled by Marxism’s complexities. Li quoted a German scholar who denied that anyone could understand Marxism before he or she reached 50. Above all, then, Marxism-Leninism’s appeal lay in its promise to guide to practice, not in its abstract philosophy. Chen Duxiu seized upon Party organization and popular mobilization as the keys to revolutionary action. With his usual lack of reserve, by 1920 Chen was attacking individualism — for which he previously served as China’s foremost spokesman — on the grounds it was anti-social, bourgeois, and even nihilist.

Another feature of Li Dazhao’s thought was his identification of the collectivity with its poorest members. In this, Li anticipated much of Mao Zedong’s thinking. It was peasants, said Li, who constituted most of China’s working class. Unlike Marx, who relegated peasants, with their ownership of small farms or at least their desire to own land, to the petty bourgeoisie, Li saw in peasants both revolutionary potential and a kind of natural goodness. Li, himself the offspring of relatively well-off farmers, might be presumed to understand village society better than many of the urban-raised intellectuals around him (or Marx). He denied that class divisions within the village were as destructive as outside forces on China’s villages. Moreover, he saw China itself as a “proletarian nation” surrounded by harmful powers. That is, all Chinese were at least potentially members of the revolutionary working class.

Most important, he gave a new role to the intelligentsia and especially to students. They were to go to the villages, work with the peasants, improve the lives of the peasantry, and in the process give meaning to their own lives. Li’s was not the first voice to call for “going to the people,” but he emphasized that both parties would benefit from the exchange.

My young friends drifting about the cities: You should know that the cities are full of crime, and that great contemptment is to be found in the villages: that life in the city is more or less the life of a ghost, but that the work going on in the villages is the work of people; that the air in the city is foul and the air in the country is pure ... do something to develop the village or to improve the livelihood of the peasants.

Once awakened, the people would be able to cast aside the intellectuals and act on their own. Intellectuals and students were not permanently to be teachers, paternalistically dispensing higher wisdom; they were to be catalysts, provoking an independent reaction. Li’s populism was widespread in the 1920s. In an essay written in the summer of 1919, for example, Mao Zedong called for a vanguard and political movement. There is no hint of Marxism in the essay and not much sense of an intellectual or political vanguard that would lead the revolution. Rather, Mao called for a highly inclusive mass politics — a “great union of the popular masses” to undertake thorough reform.

Why is the great union of the popular masses so terribly effective? Because the popular masses in any country are necessarily more numerous than the aristocracy, the capitalists and the other powerful people in a single country.... If we truly want to achieve a great union ... we must necessarily have all sorts of small unions to serve as its foundation. The human race has an innate talent for uniting together ... peasants, workers, students, women, primary-school teachers, rickshaw boys and others of all sorts....

The more profound the oppression, the greater its resistance; that which has accumulated for a long time will surely burst forth quickly.

Perhaps the germ of class struggle are here, but so is a conviction in the fundamental unity of the Chinese people and, indeed, of international brotherhood. In this, Mao was echoing Kang Youwei’s cosmopolitan utopianism.
The cautious and piecemeal liberalism of Hu Shi, resting on a more pessimistic if not cynical view of human nature, had little patience for writings like Mao’s. In fact, Mao would later complain that the major figures at Beida, like Hu, snubbed him. We will return to Mao. Nor was this the last of Hu Shi. Yet some of the weaknesses of liberalism faced in China should already be clear. Above all, liberals, with their abhorrence of violence and militarism, had no way to suggest how the reformist programs they favored could be executed. As long as warlords and foreign powers controlled China, they wielded veto power over any attempts to ameliorate the situation. As well, liberalism lacked a social base. A liberal political system depends on a liberal society based on procedural consensus. Political losers have to be prepared to wait and make their case again, and political winners have to be prepared to give them that chance. As many observers noted, China’s bourgeoisie or middle class was small and weak. Perhaps political consensus might have emerged from a stable rural society, but the Chinese countryside was far from stable. Endemic violence made liberalism irrelevant. For although liberalism, with its emphasis on individualism and property rights, seems to negate the state, it actually depends on a strong civil society coinciding with a strong state able to monopolize violence.

Still, Chinese liberalism should not be underestimated either. Prominent liberals and their followers basically dominated the worlds of education, journalism, publishing, and perhaps even commerce. Not only were a few warlords sympathetic to reform, but also the limitations of warlord power often presented interstices within which the liberals could work. Thus could a Cai Yuanpei become president of Beida. Forced to compromise with the powers-that-be, whether of the right or, later, the left, liberals acknowledged the righteousness of nationalist concerns, at least parts of Confucian morality, and peasant uprisings, without losing their essential respect for the individual or limited government.

“Science versus metaphysics” and modern Chinese conservatism

If many of China’s students became disillusioned with Wilsonian liberalism in the wake of World War I, turning to the left, others were disillusioned by the war itself and rediscovered Confucianism. Liang Qichao, for one, found his faith in progress challenged. If the West represented a better future, then how had it collapsed into insane warfare? Visiting Europe in 1919, he met the anti-positivist, intuitionist philosopher Henri Bergson, and concluded that Europeans “have dreamt the dream of the omnipotence of science, but today they are declaring the bankruptcy of science.”

Bergson, who also appealed to Li’s Dazhao, emphasized the limitations of rational thought. Rationality was a useful tool, he said, but insufficient to grasp the ceaseless flux of the universe. Only intuition or the unconscious and disinterested mind can do that and also allow the self to attain freedom. For Liang, Bergson and other critics of Enlightenment rationalism confirmed his sense that the Chinese tradition had something to offer China and the world. Chinese thought did not have all the answers, but its humanism could complement the technological successes of the West. Liang particularly focused on the Confucian–Mencian ideal of ren, compassion. In contrast to Western competitiveness, he said, ren taught harmony and compromise. Liang’s ultimate vision was an amalgamagated universal culture to which various civilizations would contribute. It is worth noting that Bertrand Russell, no friend of intuitionism, shared this composite view of a new world civilization. After his successful May Fourth speaking tour of China, Russell wrote: “The distinctive merit of our civilization, I should say, is the scientific method; the distinctive merit of the Chinese is a just conception of the ends of life.”

In 1923 certain Chinese thinkers mounted a direct attack on science’s inability to answer the important questions. Science was analytical, objective, and useful for solving practical problems. But ultimately more important was “philosophy of life”: understanding the human experience. Philosophy of life was the opposite of science: synthetic, subjective, and with moral concerns. Zhang Junmai (1886–1969) frankly laid out the heart of the issue in East-versus-West terms. “The controversy throughout our country in recent times over the New Culture, and the direction of cultural change, is not extraneous to the philosophy of life. We have our culture. The West has western culture. How are we to select what is beneficial from the West and get rid of what is harmful?” For all of science’s advances in understanding nature, it had little to say about the good or just life. For that, Zhang turned to Confucianism. Zhang was a disciple of Liang Qichao and had traveled with him in 1919 to Europe, where he stayed to study with Rudolph Eucken and read Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch. Ding Wenjiang (1888–1936), a professional geologist, led the defense of science, soon joined by Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and others. Ding’s was not a crude positivism; he emphasized that the methodology of science guaranteed not an absolute grasp of reality but one of truth, defined as verifiable sense-data. But he insisted that scientific methodology was applicable to all questions. Moreover, the defenders of science remained loyal to evolutionism and progress. Solutions to human drudgery and disease would only come through science, the precondition for true social and moral improvement.

Clearly a variety of issues, albeit linked, was being raised: not so much science versus metaphysics but how to define roles for the scientific and the spiritual or intuitive; not so much West versus East but how to selectively adapt; not so much determinism versus free will but how to balance inner and outer freedom. In the temper of the times, the “scientists” were acknowledged the winners of the debate. But Confucianism continued to produce articulate defenders. It is worth noting that Zhang Junmai himself was no obscurantist. He offered respect for science in its proper place; he
was also a believer in constitutionalism and social democracy. Both the "scientists" and the "Confucians" basically supported democratic socialism.

A more radical challenge to accepted May Fourth verities came from Liang Shuming (1893–1988). Liang explicitly denied that Chinese tradition should be junked, and he even repudiated the idea of "taking the best of East and West." For syncretism still negated the essence of Chinese civilization. It thus denied the Chinese their identity. Liang Shuming accepted modern technology, but he was deliberately trying to save the remnants of a specifically Confucian essence. Liang was not alone in this endeavor. Philosophers like Xiong Shili emphasized the role of empathy and intuition in creating the good person. Generally accepting science (not just technology) and scientific values like rationality and empiricism, they denied that science could solve all human problems or provide a basis for morality. The point is that in making this critique of science, they turned to the Confucian tradition for answers. In doing so, they marginalized themselves from the New Culture—May Fourth "mainstream" and did not seem responsive to China's urgent needs. At the level of high philosophy, Xiong's somewhat religious ontology was not meant to speak directly to politicalized students or ordinary workers. But his attempt to relate traditional philosophical ideas to existential problems facing the Chinese of his day did attract a few followers. These men argued that an influence on Chinese thought that emerged more prominently in the post-war years, after 1950.

Liang Shuming, however, did connect his philosophy to immediate social problems. He argued that human progress resulted from dealing with the environment: the first stage is the subjugation of nature, the second stage is the betterment of the community—the social ethic—and the third stage is one of spirituality. The stages can also be represented synchronically: as seen in the West, China, and India, respectively. This at least had the advantage of turning Orientalist teleologies around, for here it is not "the East" which appears as the undifferentiated Other but the West. Not a West that represents final perfection, but just the opposite. Liang ascribed the evident superiority of the West not to its being more advanced but its being more primitive. Western technology represented an earlier stage of human evolution. China, he admitted, had made the mistake of turning away from the way of aggression, vitality, and nature-subduing too early. But now the West was moving into the second stage, as seen by the rebellion of contemporary Western philosophers such as Bergson against positivism and by the new humanitarian interest in socialism there. Liang's conclusion? China must "accept Western culture as a whole but make some fundamental changes." So in the end Liang had to turn to syncretism after all. But he strongly believed that Chinese culture would mark the next stage of world evolution. And what was this Chinese culture? Liang's answer was that "The fundamental spirit of Chinese culture is the harmony and moderation of ideas and desires." 11

In particular, Liang believed that democracy, individualism (personal freedoms and rights), and, up to a point, science, were of value to the group and the individual. The West's economic growth was ultimately an expression of its decision to grapple with nature directly and aggressively. However, the environment had been conquered but humanity was left unsatisfied and spiritually cramped. Their selfishness had alienated Westerners from humanity and cut them off from the cosmos. Liang was not simply turning the West's critique of the East back on itself. For not only did he accept the virtues of the West, but he was echoing a feeling of self-doubt widely felt in Europe in the years after World War I. Yet unlike, say, Zhang Zhidong, Liang had to struggle for cultural confidence. The Chinese spirit he wanted to promote in fact needed promotion; he could not take it for granted. Indeed, raised by a progressive Confucian father, his education had been considerably less classics-oriented than Chen Duxiu's or Hu Shi's. He had attended modern schools with Western curricula. Liang was politicized by the events leading up to the Revolution of 1911, and then became a Buddhist, before he turned to Confucianism. One senses in Liang's life a personal spiritual quest. And if Liang had thoroughly absorbed certain Western notions, he still insisted that certain other basic values were uniquely Chinese: that humanity was good, for example. The Confucianism of his mature years was thus re-forged and hardened.

What exactly, then, did China have to offer the world? For Liang, the Confucian notion of ren was the true spirit of Chinese culture. However, without the material resources to carry out this ideal, Chinese culture had ossified and society had become oppressive. Now that the world was ready for a more harmonizing approach, the Chinese conception of the universal human feelings that sprang from the parent–child relationship would fill the void left by crass materialism.

Liang was no mere cultural patriot. His scheme of epochal progress did not stop with Chinese harmony but continued to the final stage of human evolution in Indian nirvana. Liang's 1921 book, Eastern and Western Cultures and their Philosophies, was quite popular, though it was unkindly remarked that Liang was most respected among high school teachers (rather than the best intellectuals). Liang's criticism of the West's "excesses" was widely shared, and not just by conservatives. But Hu Shi's reply was uncompromising. Hu found spiritual qualities not in China's poverty and backwardness but in the West's search for material improvement, which he said rested on its quest for truth. In the "race course" of human evolution, China had simply fallen behind. Even more pointedly, Lu Xun satirized "Eastern spirituality" and its promoters in his short stories. In "Kong Yiji" the main character Kong (Confucius's surname) is a failed scholar in ragged clothes, a poverty-stricken thief, and a drunkard unable to pay his bar bill, who still sees himself as a highly civilized, superior, and cultured gentleman. In "The True Story of A Q" Ah Q is not only a petty thief, lecher, and bum, but whenever he is beaten up he regards his defeat as a spiritual victory. "Then Ah Q, clutching at the root of his queue, his head on one side, would say, 'Beating an insect—how about that? I am an insect—now will you let me go?'... In less than ten
seconds, however, Ah Q would walk away also satisfied that he had won, thinking that he was the ‘Number One self-belittler,’ and that after subtracting ‘self-belittler’ what remained was ‘Number One’.”

Liang Shuming is especially interesting because he pursued his Confucian ideals in a utopian experiment of rural social reforms. Inspired by the Communists’ example of successful peasant organizing in the late 1920s, he recognized the problems of poverty, low productivity, and peasant alienation from the sources of power. He too criticised ameliorative reforms and charity projects, and he found that even well-intentioned government bureaucracies were too heavy handed. In the 1930s in a small area in Shandong he and his disciples were able to help peasants adopt new technologies and improve productivity. But he failed to achieve social mobilization of the peasants, simply because he did not intend for them to have direct political power. His disciples did not evolve into a new class of local leaders. Liang’s efforts remained limited in scope; he failed to revitalize the countryside that he himself took to be the locus of Chinese identity.

The effort to find something strong and living in the Chinese tradition was not limited to self-proclaimed Confucians. Buddhism experienced something of a revival in the early decades of the twentieth century as well. Under the leadership of the reformist monk Taixu (1890–1947) some Buddhist institutions such as schools and lay societies, as well as monasteries, moved in a more this-worldly direction, not unlike the “social gospel” of the progressive wing of Christian missionaries. Taixu thus emphasized the need for monks and lay believers to work together to provide systematic charity to poor families, medical clinics, and free, modern schools. Taixu tried to form a loose synthesis of the various schools of Chinese Buddhism – from Chan (Zen) and Pure Land to the more esoteric Huayan and Tantric traditions – claiming that none possessed the complete truth but all were legitimately based on the Buddha’s teachings. And he tried to reshape traditional Mahayana beliefs so they would be compatible with modern science, though he too noted the failure of science to provide moral or spiritual grounding. Buddhism transcended the limitations of science, offering “inward illumination” and intuitive understanding. Clearly, the ideas of Taixu, Liang Shuming, Zhang Junmai, and the late Liang Qichao overlapped in important respects, not the least of which was their faith in social progress.

Taixu foresaw the conversion of the entire world to Buddhist principles. Though his reforms did not, in his own lifetime, affect the majority of Buddhist institutions and believers, who continued traditional practices, Taixu’s self-appointed task to make the Buddhist dharma useful and meaningful to conservatives and progressives, and to Chinese and foreigners, in the end inspired many and was thus a significant element of intellectual life in the Republic. Liang Shuming’s attraction to Buddhism was in fact a quite widespread phenomenon. Still, the attempt to make creative use of tradition while pursuing modernity could never be easy, either intellectually or psychologically.

Anarchists versus communists: Defining Marxism

The tendency of historians to define “May Fourth” in terms of “radicalism” and “iconoclasm” seems redrawn. The May Fourth thinkers were not all radicals, either culturally or politically. But it seems no exaggeration to say that belief in socialism of one kind or another was widely shared across the spectrum. Zhang Junmai and Liang Shuming counted themselves as socialists. At the other end of the political spectrum, anarchists were almost all supporters of communism, though a few exponents of extreme individualism and followers of Nietzsche and Max Stirner existed. Sun Yat-sen advocated a kind of state socialism, as we have seen, and his followers were among China’s first serious students of Marxism. Guild socialism, syndicalism, labor-learning, and the New Village movement, were all variations on the theme of social radicalism. Marxist ideas thus had to compete, first, not with conservative or liberal ideas but with other forms of socialism. Chinese radicalism in the May Fourth era had a basically anarchist flavor. Witness the words of the philosophy polymath and one of the founders of the CCP, Zhang Shenfu (1893–1986), who explained his conversion to Marxism in 1920: “My basic opinion is simply this: destroy the state, burn down class barriers and marriage. Having realized the evil that is capitalism... I have an absolute faith in socialism. Communism is the essence of socialism, so naturally I have an absolute faith in communism.”

Hundreds of anarchist groups were formed in the wake of May Fourth. Shenfu’s disciples founded newspapers and established propaganda bureaus. Most of these efforts were ephemeral, but they illustrate the appeal of anarchist ideas – wide if not always deep. Radicals wanted to see the fundamental restructuring of society along more egalitarian and democratic lines. Social revolution was expected to be inclusive, and hence minimally violent (coercion might only be needed against warlords and the small number of comprador bourgeoisie). Mutual aid, adapted from Kropotkin, was the keystone of Chinese anarchism, designed to complement and complete the picture of social struggle and competition presented in Darwinism. What we might call “mutual aid thinking” was widespread in the May Fourth era. It could even be seen as an extension of the Confucian emphasis on social harmony, though without Confucianism’s hierarchical thinking. And mutual aid offered another way to think about organized political action outside of the boundaries imposed by militarism.

To begin with, anarchists and Marxists shared a great deal. The CCP itself was organized in the early 1920s with many anarchist members; it took several years for the anarchists to leave or be expelled. Ideologically, the two shared a belief in social revolution. The early Marxists also tended to start with a fairly inclusive notion of revolution, with an emphasis on voluntarism: the ability of people to make changes in society according to their will. The strain of Marxism that emphasized economic determinism was never popular in China. Li Dazhao, for one, kept the ethico-spiritual transformation of humanity through “mutual aid” constantly in mind.
Furthermore, both groups believed in democracy of a participatory and radical kind. They combined individual liberation and community solidarity. On the one hand, many communists were nearly as critical of the state as anarchists, and on the other, many anarchists increasingly accepted class struggle and even a special role for the proletariat. The very term “communism” in Chinese was at this time largely associated with the compound “anarchist-communism.”

Both anarchism and communism, as modern political ideologies, were Western imports. They represented a new language to talk about social questions, and Chinese thinkers had to adopt neologisms to label such imported intellectual systems. Anarchism literally refers to something like the “doctrine of no-government,” while communism might be called the “doctrine of shared-property.” Translation into Chinese did not significantly affect the meaning of the terms, though the range of connotations differed. The Marxist notion of “proletariat” or industrial working class was translated as the “property-less class” (which is faithful to the root meaning of proletariat), but the Chinese were more inclusive than Marx.

Foreign loan words, precisely because of their obvious origins, were understood to need defining and could not be taken at face value. The process of defining terms was part of the modernization of political discourse. Such terms were often derived from the Japanese, who dealt with many of the same problems a generation earlier.

One result of the extensive use of neologisms and new concepts was to make political discussions rather strange for everyone. Political concepts were defamiliarized. Theorists could find Chinese precedents for democracy and socialism, even anarchism, but these precedents were used to explain and define what still remained new concepts. Ideologies were seen as modern, whether or not they were entirely Western. And none seemed intrinsically less strange or more idealistic than any other.

Anarchists and communists initially did not disagree much about democracy or the role of the state. Chinese had to educate themselves on the finer points of correct Marxist-Leninist ideology. Their debates with the anarchists were part of this education. The first major disagreement was over revolutionary strategy. Anarchists distrusted the communist (or Bolshevik) emphasis on Party organization, the discipline required of Party members, and the whole notion of a leading vanguard. While most anarchists appreciated the power of class struggle, they would not make it the keystone of the revolution. They proposed turning power over to the “whole people” as rapidly as possible. And they grew increasingly dubious of events unfolding in the Soviet Union under Lenin.

In 1921 Chen Duxiu and Ou Shengbai (1893–1973), a young anarchist student at Beida, debated their differences. Reprinting the debate in New Youth, Chen ridiculed Ou’s vision of a society without any state structures to compel obedience to social norms. What about reactionaries and criminals? For his part, Ou essentially denied that a conflict existed between the individual and the group. He pointed out that he was not advocating the extreme individualism associated with some anarchists, and he thought the interests of society and those of the individual could be reconciled. Proper education would eliminate a-social behavior, and people would find their individual freedom in the group. In present-day society, it was the state and laws that prevented individuals from building a natural society where they could associate freely and cooperatively. Chen, however, in a complete turnaround from his New Culture position, explicitly demanded that the individual must give way to the group. He saw societies as complex entities requiring coercive laws.

The two men also differed on the nature of revolution. Chen denounced distant utopias and advocated revolution in the immediate, far-from-perfect present. But he did not spell out what this might mean for democracy. It is true, of course, that the anarchists had weak organizations. Their study groups, communes, publishing enterprises, and labor groups, all operated entirely on a voluntary basis. They saw themselves as educating and promoting rather than as leading other classes to revolution. Chen said that communism would come to China when it won 100,000 converts—regardless of the wishes of the majority. This implied that the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would oppress society itself, including the proletariat.

The anarchists saw this potential for authoritarianism and explicitly criticized it. They pointed out that the communist experience in Russia was demonstrating that the dictatorship of the proletariat actually referred to the “vanguard party.” Whatever necessity might justify proletarian dictatorship, nothing could justify dictatorship by a handful of intellectuals or professional revolutionaries. Anarchists worried that Communists, in spite of worthy goals, were in fact heading down a road that would raise up the Party, strengthen the state, and actually lead away from a classless society. The vanguard party signified minority rule; this minority could not be trusted to rule well or to give up power. Rather, it would inevitably be drawn to defend its narrow interests and re-establish classes.

For anarchists, the problem was rooted in the state, and so “regardless of whether you have a democratic government or a government of the workers and peasants, in fact they all exploit the blood of the workers for the benefit of the minority who have special privileges.” (By “democracy” was meant bourgeois democracy—tricking ordinary people to think they were freely electing representatives while in fact big money was making all the political decisions.) The anarchists believed that coercion was evil whatever its origins. In effect, anarchists criticized the communist dichotomy between revolutionary means and utopian ends. To the anarchists, the revolutionary process itself had to encompass the values they fought for. Cooperatives, for example, were a perfectly legitimate goal: they would be a feature of the new society, and they also could be a means of promoting revolution in a particular place by freeing the people of the exploitation of a middleman and teaching them about what we might today call participatory democracy.
There might be leaders for specific tasks, but privileges would be allowed in neither revolutionary organization nor future society.

But to the communists, the anarchists' ideals were simply unrealistic. Communists argued that the proletariat was uniquely positioned, due to its oppression, to lead the liberation of all of society. Furthermore, the state would be necessary for a long, long time. Like all forms of authority, the communists argued, government was a tool that could be used for good or for evil. Without coercion, how could the oppressed ever succeed in demanding their rights? Through violent class struggle, class consciousness would be produced. Even after revolutionary victory, the bourgeoisie, skilled in the ways of manipulation, would need to be controlled. Finally—and here the communists certainly seemed more realistic than the anarchists—human nature was not all good. As such, it would take generations of social education to produce individuals truly capable of group life. Meanwhile, the dictatorship of the proletariat could evolve into the democracy of the whole people, uncorrupted by capitalism but still needing vigilance against evil forces.

Thus the main appeal of Marxism in the 1920s was its promise to guide effective revolutionary action. In this sense, Leninism or Bolshevism might be said to have been more important than "Marxism" as an abstract theory. By the mid-1920s disillusionment with the mass movements of the May Fourth period had set in. All those marches, student unions, and merchant-worker alliances had produced no long-term results. Nor did the ephemeral anarchist publications and communal experiments actually create the germs of a new society. Leninism, on the other hand, offered a technology of revolution. And at the same time, Marxism-Leninism offered a powerful tool to analyse Chinese society in terms of class structure. The gentry was linked to "feudalism" and the bourgeoisie was linked to imperialism and capitalist exploitation: these classes did not represent the true China of workers and peasants. Yet Marxism-Leninism did not promise easy solutions. Years of hard, disciplined work would be necessary—perhaps that appeared to a certain type of person. The Chinese Communist Party slowly built up a cadre of dedicated converts: communism was a full-time job. Communists were expected to make sacrifices—communism appealed to people both idealistic and ambitious.

Representatives of the Communist International (Comintern) first arrived in China from Moscow in March of 1920. Their activities will be examined further in the next chapter, but it is sufficient here to note that their meetings with radical Chinese intellectuals and students produced study groups that would form the basis of the Chinese Communist Party. It is important to remember, too, that this entire process occurred "underground." Aside from temporary pockets of tolerance, anarchists and communists could not organize legally. For some time, the CCP remained tiny.

We should not imagine Marxism-Leninism sweeping all before it and converting an entire generation. Few intellectuals could accept Party discipline, which would basically turn them into professional revolutionaries.

Organization-building and ideological purification went hand in hand. The second Congress of the CCP in 1922 saw the expulsion of heterodox elements such as anarchists. The self-image of the intellectual as hero—enlightening the benighted masses—gave way to the image of the self-abnegating servant of the people. As the "oppressed" learned to speak for themselves during the 1920s, the intellectuals had even less of a role to play. Where the Confucian gentleman had been expected to fulfill his humanity through leading society and government, the modern intellectual was expected to awaken and enlighten. Marxist intellectuals were expected to understand Marxist-Leninist dogma, but the only claim to power came through successful revolutionary practice. None the less, the first CCP members were nearly all intellectuals and students; then workers and finally peasants were admitted into the Party.

Common themes in May Fourth discourse

Liberals, radicals, traditionalists: Chinese faced a range of questions associated with China's incorporation into a larger world. This went beyond the problem of imperialism. Doctrines widely regarded as self-evidently true: a generation before now appeared to be handicaps, irrelevant, or at best needing fundamental rethinking. Strikingly different doctrines and ideas needed to be understood if not followed. Some kind of relativism was inevitable; norms and values could no longer be regarded as universal. Such were the challenges of modernity, made especially painful for Chinese intellectuals since so much of the process seemed to be driven from outside. The problem of becoming modern, then, unavoidably involved the question of national identity. Who were the Chinese? How were they to survive these evil times? If they were inadequate—unable to "adapt" in the Darwinist language still in use—how could they be made better? The conservative impulse to safeguard Chinese culture was closely tied to questions of national identity and national pride. Even in anarchist discourse, there is a certain national pride in the possibility that it might be the Chinese who would lead the world to the anarchist paradise. For Marxists, a new answer focused on the common Chinese people: the "masses."

The changing reputation of the Boxers illustrates some of the intellectual transitions of the May Fourth period. The leaders of the New Culture movement, dedicated to rationalism, modernity, and the twin "science and democracy," had little use for the Boxers. Hu Shi attacked their superstition. Chen Duxiu impartially blamed Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, popular opera, and conservatism for causing the Boxers in the first place. He worried about a revival of Boxerism, arguing in 1918 that...

...the ideas of the Boxers and the reality of the Boxers are everywhere throughout China and are in the ascendant. Can we be sure that the Boxers will not re-emerge in the future?... There are at present two
paths open to us: one is the path of light that leads toward republicanism, science, and atheism; the other is the path of darkness leading toward autocracy, superstition, and theism.24

But such elitism was to come under challenge. By 1924 Chen Duxiu himself, then secretary-general of the CCP, had completely reversed his position. The anti-foreignism of the Boxers, no matter how extreme, was justified by the "bloody oppression suffered by the whole of China" at the hands of the foreign imperialists. The Boxers' superstition was only reflected the social conditions of the age, and at least they contributed to the movement for national resistance. Instead of loathing the barbarism of the antiforeign Boxers of those years, we should loathe the civilization of the warlords, bureaucrats, unscrupulous merchants, university professors, and newspapermen who at present curry favor with the foreigners!25 In this view of modern China, the Boxers deserved to be grouped with the reform movement of 1898, the 1911 Revolution, and the May Fourth movement itself. Non-communists too began to re-evaluate the Boxers. Even Hu Shi acknowledged that the Boxers might be seen as an example of national resistance to barbaric Western aggression, though he remained horrified by their indiscriminate killing.

Professional historians played a key role in redefining what it meant to be Chinese. That their voices were influential was perhaps due to the traditional respect granted to history in the Confucian view.26 A school of May Fourth historians, often students of Hu Shi, called themselves "doubters of antiquity" and demonstrated that myths about ancient Chinese emperors and dynasties were, indeed, only myths. Fu Sinian (1896-1950) emphasized that history was a universal process toward rationality and science.27 At the same time, Hu and Fu found important precursors of scientific thought in the pre-Qin classical period from about the fifth to the third centuries BC, thus maintaining a, if not the, central position in world history for China. Other historians emphasized unique qualities of Chinese history and culture which contributed over time to its unique national spirit. More conservative historians found Confucian social ethics to be at the core of the national identity, but they also acknowledged that "China" was built by many different peoples and classes over thousands of years of invasions, population shifts, and a mixed process of assimilation and change. In the case of invasions, for example, outside conquerors both assimilated to Chinese ways, to a degree, and also contributed new features to the ongoing growth of the civilization. The notion that China always and completely assimilated foreign conquerors remained popular, obviously fitting into the antiforeignism shared across the political spectrum; however, professional historians, both the "doubters of antiquity" and those of a more conservative bent, were moving away from this comforting view to a more complex vision of amalgamation.

Beyond the work of historians using traditional written sources lay a broader intellectual movement to learn more about popular culture. For all
10 The rise of political parties

Karl Marx looked at imperialism from the viewpoint of bourgeois capitalism and so praised the breaking down of Chinese walls. Lenin's view was for once more subtle. Lenin's analysis began with the expansive tendencies of the European powers, which he traced to the stage of "monopoly capitalism." This had produced a crisis of overproduction, since exploited workers could not afford the products being churned out by ever-more-efficient factories. The concentration of production and ownership into fewer and fewer hands, and the corresponding concentration of finance capital, would have led European workers into revolution if capitalists had not found a solution. Their solution, Lenin saw, was to force excess production into captive colonial markets and exploit those colonies for their resources and cheap labor. This, in combination with what might be called the politico-military strengths of the Powers, resulted in a division of the world among the Powers. But monopoly capitalism was unstable or "parasitic," since creditor states became economically unproductive.¹

Today, few economists, if any, agree with Lenin's analysis. It may be doubted that creditor states remain unproductive instead of switching to higher technologies as the global division of labor evolves, though the "problem" of excess capital was widely noticed in the early twentieth century. But the point is that it had political consequences. Lenin believed that, since capitalism now depended on imperialism, anti-imperialist movements threatened the entire world capitalist order. World revolution would begin in the colonies, not the advanced nations (as Marx had posited). In the wake of the Russian Revolution, Lenin founded the Comintern (Third Communist International) in 1919 to help the national struggles of the "oppressed nations." By striking the capitalistic Powers where it hurt — their colonial enterprises, sources of raw materials, cheap labor, and markets — colonized peoples would be allying themselves with the industrial proletariats.

What this meant for the oppressed nations themselves was that local revolutions should not be limited to their own proletariats. According to Lenin's analysis, in societies still dominated by the peasantry and crafts production, proletariats were tiny. The Comintern thus sought to aid "bourgeois nationalists" as much as local communist parties. Indeed, Lenin fully expected the struggle in Asia to be mainly waged by the bourgeoisie and the peasantry.

Lenin's theory of imperialism made sense to Chinese radicals. Indeed, important elements of it were anticipated by a number of Chinese writers, as early as Liu Shipei in 1908. Liu, who as an anarchist favored a revolution of the "whole people" anyway, said that if all the world's oppressed people rose up in revolution, they would deprive the Powers of their ill-gotten gains and encourage Western peoples to overthrow their own governments. Unlike Lenin, Liu had understood imperialism as a combination of racism and state power as well as capitalism. In this, he was closer to the views of scholars today.

Chinese were consumed with the problem of foreign imperialism from the turn of the century, fully aware that unlike some of its neighbors China did not — fully — become a part of any particular Empire. No Chinese government from the late Qing until the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 could claim genuine sovereignty over the whole of the country. They were constrained, no doubt, by internal weaknesses, but they were also constrained by the unequal treaties; the presence of foreign military forces in the cities and on the rivers and railroads; and the domination of foreign ownership of the key elements of modern industry: banking, utilities, mining, shipping, and railroads. By many measures the foreign presence was dwarfed by the size of China; the Chinese governments would not or could not do everything that the foreigners wanted; the foreign powers were themselves divided; and to a degree the Chinese did continue to govern themselves. But the dynamics of imperialist expansion operated in China just as they did in full-fledged colonies. Though Western capital looks small against China's overall economy, it bought a lot of government. Furthermore, it was directed at the key points of the Chinese economy, especially transportation and manufacturing. And China's debtor status severely limited the scope of action available to any Chinese government after the huge Boxer indemnities of 1901. Politically active Chinese of all ideological persuasions and attitudes toward the West were well aware of the realities of imperialism.

In the wake of the May Fourth movement, initial patriotic energies dissipated. Students were eventually ready to go back to classes, workers could not strike indefinitely, and merchants needed to reopen their shops. Yet, while anti-imperialist actions disappeared from the front pages, anti-imperialism became more focused in two small political parties. The Guomindang (Nationalist Party) and the Chinese Communist Party were to lead a new, more disciplined "National Revolution" in the 1920s. These "parties" were not political parties in the Western sense of the term: primarily devoted to waging elections based on a fairly loose set of interests and ideologies. Rather, both became Leninist parties, tightly structured, centralized (within limits imposed by contending leaders and factions), and ideologically
committed organizations. They restricted membership—would-be members had to demonstrate their commitment and loyalty—while they strove to mobilize mass support. The GMD quickly built up its own army and schools, prelude to the military reunification of the country. The GMD and the CCP both emphasized correct ideology and loyalty to leaders.

What most distinguished them from Western political parties, however, was not their organization but the political context in which they had to operate. The political realm is an arena of contestation over power and resources; who gets what, when, and how. "Politics" in the West generally refers to an arena of policy-making ostensibly demarcated from society by its rules of the game, and to a loose but broad consensus on values that lies behind them. Secondarily, "politics" refers to an arena of unscrupulous struggle for power and wealth. In this view, politics is dirty and politicians corrupt. In the early twentieth century in China the latter view predominated. "Politics" referred to the obvious machinations of the various camps of the warlords. Politicians were widely seen as unprincipled minions. The various constitutions promulgated in Beijing were each more hopeless than the last. Each parliament seemed more venal than the last.

**Guangzhou and the early Guomindang**

The revolutionary government that had come to power in Guangzhou in the 1911 Revolution was dedicated to the radical restructuring of local society. Sun Yat-sen's old comrade in arms, Hu Hanmin (1879–1936), and the local activist Chen Jiangming (1877–1933) supported universal schooling, equality for women, compulsory military service, and popular mobilization. But as they increased taxes, confiscated the property of guilds and nativestock associations, and attacked traditional but popular institutions like temples, the Cantonese elites turned against them.

The government collapsed in the defeat of the so-called second revolution. Hu Hanmin and other leaders were forced to flee with Sun to Japan in July of 1913. Local elites across China sought accommodation with Yuan Shikai. Sun's new Chinese Revolutionary Party was not a success, though it allowed Sun to strengthen his contacts with some powerful men, including leaders of the criminal gang, in Shanghai. Sun also accepted money from the Japanese and, apparently, the Germans, and so in the rise of warlordism after Yuan's death Sun was able to buy military support to force his way back into Guangzhou.

Before we turn to the rise of the Guomindang under Sun's leadership, the controversial issue of his foreign contacts should be aired. If he was such a nationalist, how could he beg and take so much from the Powers? In fact, throughout his political life, Sun was frequently willing to promise benefits to foreign nations in return for their support. From a nationalist point of view, this has proved embarrassing, diminishing Sun's right to be called a patriotic leader. Sun was well aware of the problem, often seeking to keep such agreements secret. Particularly embarrassing was Sun's support for concessions to Japan in the 1910s, which did in fact damage his reputation. However, it should also be pointed out that Sun was a natural cosmopolitan. Born in the Guangzhou area, the region of China most open to international trade from early times, Sun was also educated in Hawaii and Hong Kong, and spent considerable time abroad, with Japanese, British, and American friends. Perhaps naively, he thought that the world would welcome a stronger China. Though possibly an opportunist, Sun's ultimate patriotism cannot be doubted. Indeed, he seems to have had no intention of keeping many of the promises he made to foreigners. He probably received as much as two million Chinese dollars from Germany in early 1917, for example—and his Guangzhou government declared war on Germany in September.

Meanwhile, back in Guangzhou in the late 1910s, Sun tried to establish a new government that did not recognize the legitimacy of the warlord regimes in Beijing. In fact, he claimed to be the legitimate government of the Republic of China. More practically, he hoped Guangzhou would become a model of good government and a base for the military reunification of China. Sun recognized the need for military support. "To re-establish a true Republic, we need to have at our disposal two forces: the army and the navy," he declared. "It is impossible to re-establish a true Republic ... without recourse to the armed forces." He had some support from Chen Jiangming's troops, but this was dwarfed by the opposition of the larger warlords of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, all of whom took an interest in the commercial wealth of the Guangzhou–Hong Kong axis. By the spring of 1918 Sun was again forced to abandon Guangzhou. He was able to make a brief return in 1921, but when Chen Jiangming turned against him in 1922 Sun had to flee again.

These confusing machinations not only reflect the militarism of the period, but also the contradiction between the two goals of treating greater Guangzhou as a model and as a military base. In Nationalist historiography, Chen Jiangming is condemned as a traitor to Sun. But Chen was dedicated—as long with much of the Guangzhou elite—to a federalist vision of local development. In control of much of Fujian Province to the north, Chen pursued social reform and offered a haven for anarchist and Communist organizers. Sun, on the other hand, remained a centralist who wanted to use the resources of the southeast to conquer the rest of China.

Finally, in 1923 Sun's supporters, including mercenaries from Yunnan, were able to push Chen out of Guangzhou, and Sun named himself generalized of a small military government in the city. This was to form the basis of a reorganized Guomindang. Was Sun, then, simply a minor warlord? Public opinion generally regarded him more as a troubleshooter than a potential leader of the nation. He made deals with the major warlords, trying to play one off against the other; or what Sun called "the customary expedient strategy of allying with someone in order to expel..."
someone else." Although he spoke in the name of the Republic, Sun’s small Guangzhou-based government was simply not politically significant in national terms. Although Sun’s idealism might seem to have set him apart from the other warlords, ideals by themselves, especially without the means to carry them out, may be dismissed as mere propaganda.

Sun’s insistence on the legitimacy of his government and his idealism did distinguish him from the other warlords to a degree. But the significant break with warlordism came in his organization of a new Party – the Guomindang. No warlord had a political party as extensive or as well organized. The Guomindang soon developed an ideology designed to appeal to progressive patriots; the means to promote social mobilization, especially of workers and students in Guangzhou and Shanghai; newspapers and schools; and its own military wing. It was ideally positioned to ride the crest of the nationalist upsurge of the 1920s.

The Guomindang was born on 10 October 1919 – the eighth anniversary of the 1911 Revolution amidst the tumult of the May Fourth movement. It might be seen as simply a new form of the associations Sun had been organizing since the 1890s. The Revive China Society, the National Alliance, the Chinese Revolutionary Party; one after another Sun had built insurrectionary organizations around himself. His lack of leadership skills had been one factor behind their repeated failures. Organizationally, the GMD stood between the loose structure of the National Alliance (founded in 1905 out of various revolutionary organizations) and the cultist Chinese Revolutionary Party (1913, where members vowed personal fealty to Sun). The GMD was to develop an elaborate, elastic, ideology, and its own military wing. For Sun and his supporters came to realize that the student movement had created new political possibilities. Sun was not personally sympathetic to the cultural iconoclasm of the New Thought movement, but he appreciated the democratic and nationalist thrust of May Fourth. After all, Sun’s Three People’s Principles encompassed nationalism, democracy, and people’s livelihood. The calls of the younger generation for science and democracy were compatible with Sun’s views, which included a faith in technological modernization, and the ideal of “people’s livelihood” was congruous with the popularity of socialism.

Sun and his followers used their forced retirement from politics between 1918 and 1920 to develop the Guomindang’s ideology. This ideology will be examined in the next chapter; here, we simply need to note that the Three People’s Principles (Sunism) were elaborated into a political platform that targeted warlordism and imperialism. Sun also developed the notion that, once the GMD seized power, a “revolutionary period” would follow. This would be a time of “political tutelage” as the people were prepared for constitutional government. This time, the mistakes of 1911 would not be repeated, and the revolutionaries would not lay down their arms.

Sunism did not provide the new Guomindang with immediate appeal. For several years the Party remained small and ineffective. At first, it was not clear that the GMD would be different from the parliamentary parties of the early Republic. Yet by 1923 it was attracting students who had participated in May Fourth organizations. Hundreds moved south to become part of the "national revolution." Why? What had changed?

In February 1923 Sun was able to resume his title as generalissimo of a Guangzhou-based government. It remained at the mercy of larger warlord armies, and relied on the support or neutrality of rival militarists from the southeast, southwest, and central China – who preferred that a relatively powerless Guomindang control the important port of Guangzhou rather than one of their more serious rivals. At the same time, in spite of Sun’s claims to ideological certainty, the GMD was paralyzed by factional rivalries. But the Comintern was coming to save Sun. He seems to have initially accepted Russian assistance and an alliance with the Chinese Communist Party reluctantly. But he drove the Guomindang to the left after being rebuffed in other quarters. No doubt the “May Fourth spirit” of revolutionary optimism helped radicalize the GMD; however, the specific alliance with the Soviet Union depended on Sun’s reading of the needs of the GMD. He had rejected Russian overtures in 1920 and 1921, but by 1923 he had nowhere else to turn.

It is important to understand the international situation of the 1920s in order to make sense out of political developments in China itself. At the end of World War I the world was dominated by a kind of British–US axis. Some room was being made for Japan in East Asia, but the “Washington system” did not recognize Russian or Chinese interests. It was, in essence, devoted to preserving a post-war capitalist world order. The Washington Conference of 1921–2 brought together the European powers, the US, and Japan in an effort to avoid both another world war and nationalist revolutions. The US, Britain, and Japan agreed to restrict the size of their battle fleets. In regard to East Asia, the treaties theoretically recognized China’s “sovereignty” but in reality they were designed to bolster the status quo. The Washington system thus in effect ratified imperialism in China. For Sun, Britain’s attitudes were made clear in the autumn of 1923. He formally requested that a share of the revenues from China’s customs tariffs be given to his Guangzhou government instead of all being sent to Beijing. The Maritime Customs Service had been under foreign control since the nineteenth century in order to make first claim on revenues to repay indemnities. Although there was some support in the West for Sun’s claim, London rebuffed him. When Sun threatened to take the revenues by force, a large display of British naval power in Guangzhou Harbor followed. Gunboat diplomacy was alive and well. Not until this point did Sun abandon his hopes of international cooperation under the Washington system and begin to speak the language of anti-imperialism.

The new Soviet Union, on the other hand, denounced imperialism without qualifications. In March 1920 it publicly denounced all the unequal treaties signed between the Czarist government and the Qing. All Chinese
patriots, leftist or not, were impressed. This move also paved the way for Comintern agents to sneak over the border into China. Anti-imperialism was not only a major tenet of Leninist theory; Lenin also devoted hard resources to the Comintern. Lenin was happy to support Asian communist parties but, as we have seen, he was even more eager to support stronger “bourgeois” movements as long as they were anti-imperialist. Indeed, Leninism held that China was not ready for a revolution of the proletariat, which, defined as the urban industrial working class, was of course too small. Instead, given its backward economy, China was ready for a kind of popular, multi-class revolution.

In actual fact, the Soviet Union did not abandon all the special privileges of the old Czarist treaties. In particular, it wanted to ensure the security of its Pacific railroad routes. But the Comintern none the less found common cause with Chinese anti-imperialists. Its first efforts to find support among the northern warlords failed. Efforts to turn May Fourth Marxists into Communists were more successful, but proceeded slowly. That left Sun Yat-sen. The Comintern agents Grigori Voitinsky (who spoke fluent English and so could communicate with Sun directly) and Hans Merin held extensive discussions with Sun during his Shanghai “exile” in 1920 and 1921. As always, Sun was interested in whatever aid could help him put together a military force to unify the country. He also seems to have had a genuine interest in the modernization policies of the Soviet Union, though he never accepted the Comintern’s views of the revolution. Unable to find any northern warlords interested in an alliance with the Soviet Union, and with no real communist movement to speak of, Sun increasingly looked like the Comintern’s only hope.

The Chinese Communist Party and the First United Front

With the encouragement of Comintern advisers, a small group of intellectuals founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921. Its growth over the next two decades was extremely rocky and uneven. The CCP, important as it was in certain spheres, remained a relatively minor political actor in China as a whole. It did, however, play a key role in turning another relatively minor party, the GMD, into a powerful and dynamic force.

It was the Chinese who built the CCP, but the role of Comintern advisers was essential. Aside from meeting with Sun Yat-sen, Voitinsky also held frequent meetings with Chen Duxiu and other radicals in the summer of 1920. He presented the Russian Revolution as a model for the Chinese to follow. Voitinsky seems to have been very clear on his job. He treated the leading Chinese radicals with great respect; he presented himself as a guide and teacher, not a commander. The Chinese radicals had formed Marxist study groups; by late 1920 some of these were being converted into underground cells. At Beida, in Shanghai, and in other cities like Guangzhou, Wuhan, and Changsha, as well as among overseas students in Japan and France, the members of these cells devoted themselves to the study of Marxism and the Russian Revolution, to the translation of Marxist works, and, where possible, to public discussions of socialism. The next step, under Voitinsky’s guidance, was to form these cells into a party that would be committed to political action.

The formation of a disciplined party over the course of 1921 and 1922 was a process of winnowing, even of purging, not growth. Anarchists, guild socialists, and even Marxists who did not want to accept Party discipline, either left voluntarily or were purged from membership. New members were recruited: from among workers, especially leaders in the Shanghai union movement, and also women and youth. But the ideological and personal requirements for membership in the CCP were strict. Only a few of the May Fourth generation were initially interested. One was, was Mao Zedong. Over the course of 1920 he seems to have abandoned anarchism as impractical and turned to Marxism-Leninism in its stead. Mao attended the first Party Congress that established the CCP in July 1921. This secret meeting in Shanghai, of some twenty men representing local cells, adopted an official platform. Ironically, neither of the “founders” of the Party, Chen Duxiu or Li Dazhao, were able to attend, and about half of the representatives at the first congress had dropped out within a year. Chen Duxiu was elected general secretary in absentia, but it is clear that neither he nor many of the other original CCP members regarded Party work as their primary responsibility or source of identity—yet.

The CCP was a secret organization of whose activities, like schools and bookstores, could be conducted in the open. Its leaders, though openly radical, were tolerated by the police in the French concession in Shanghai. A certain amount of free speech was allowed; socialism could certainly be discussed, though New Youth was banned at one point. Heavy police pressure against radicals in Beijing tended to push them to Shanghai, where, ironically, they were partially protected by Western legal culture. By the second Party congress in 1922 the winnowing process was producing a more cohesive, if smaller, organization. Twelve delegates represented some 195 members across China. They committed themselves to working closely with the Comintern, including sending members for further training in Moscow.

Where did China’s first Communists come from? Many came from provincial China. Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, and Zhang Shenfu stand out as the only major intellectuals involved in the early CCP. Nor did many of the other members come from powerful families or have brilliant university careers. Rather, many came from areas somewhat outside the rapidly modernizing and Westernizing metropolitan areas (though not the truly remote parts of the countryside). Mao himself is a good example. So was his friend, Cai Hesen (1895–1931), who played a pivotal role in first interest in Mao in Marxism. Cai was a high-school classmate of Mao, from a fairly distinguished lineage but brought up by his mother in a poor household. He was not able to start elementary school until he was sixteen, though, self-taught,
he made rapid progress. At the end of 1919 he sailed to France as part of the Work–Study program established by anarchists. But in France he became a convert to Marxism, quickly establishing himself as one of China’s best Marxist theoreticians and describing the advantages of Marxism in letters to Mao back in Hunan. Cai worked to build a Chinese Marxist Party in Europe in 1920–1, and he was elected to the CCP’s Central Committee in 1922.

Friendships and provincial connections were a major part of the recruitment process. Take Shen Dingyi (1882–1928), son of a landlord in Zhejiang Province. He had worked with the 1911 revolutionaries and built a political career in Zhejiang Province, though a career interrupted by the crackdowns of Yuan Shikai and warlords. Working as a journalist in Shanghai during the May Fourth movement, in 1920 Shen became a member of the Marxist Study Society, a group of ten men in their twenties and thirties (plus Chen Duxiu, then 41). Some of their meetings produced quarrels so caustic that they had to break up for the evening. But soon they formed a Communist cell, and Shen went on to help found the CCP. Another Zhejiang Communist, Shi Cunxiang, an iconoclastic young anarchist who had denounced his own father in the May Fourth movement, moved to Shanghai after his work–study commune in Beijing fell apart. There Shen Dingyi and others guided him toward Marxism, and sponsored him to study Marxism in Tokyo. Shi continued to work as a Communist organizer until 1927, when, though breaking with the Party, he remained an independent Marxist intellectual.

The debates between communists and anarchists and other socialists served to define Chinese Marxism, as noted in the previous chapter. It was not that the CCP’s leaders wanted to purge their membership so much as the process of defining a coherent Marxist identity inevitably did so. Li Dazhao, at least, had hoped all Chinese socialists would remain united. Ideological purity, however, could not be fudged. Communists may have been a minority among radicals – themselves a minority – but they already possessed a notable presence due to their organizational coherence. Some among the anarchists and socialists found their promise of more effective revolution-building appealing. Moreover, if anarchists and other socialists found it natural to mix politics and interrupt their political activities with their careers as students, educators, or journalists, Communists committed themselves to whatever it took to build the revolution. As the historian Arif Dirlik put it, “The appearance of an exclusive Communist identity that brooked no ideological ‘confusion’ does not imply that the identity of every participant in the early Communist movement was therefore transformed, and purged of the legacy of the past. What is at issue here is not the identity of every individual Communist, but the emergence of an organizational and ideological identity that clearly demarcated the boundary between Communist and non-Communist, and brooked no eclecticism or pluralism.” Of course, disagreements within the CCP continued along ideological, personal, and factional lines, and local branches operated with some autonomy. But basically you decided you were either a Communist or not. If you were, then you recognized a chain of authority that went through your local branch up to CCP headquarters in Shanghai and ultimately to Moscow.

The Comintern, following the Leninist theory of imperialism, demanded that Communists support all Asian nationalists, even if they were bourgeois. The smaller CCP therefore should form an alliance with the larger GMD, sacrificing its own revolutionary plans (for the time being). Neither the GMD nor the CCP was enthusiastic about an alliance. Many in the GMD feared that the obviously different goals of the CCP would divide their movement or even hijack it, while many in the CCP feared the loss of their autonomy. None the less, the Comintern insisted. In ideological terms, the Comintern’s representatives in China decided that the GMD was not purely a bourgeois party, but rather a blend of the intelligentsia, overseas Chinese, workers, and soldiers. Already, then, ideology was being shaped to meet organizational needs rather than the other way around – though the GMD was indeed much more a blend of various forces than the “bourgeois party” that Communists later claimed it to be. The CCP went on record as favoring a United Front in 1922. Sun Yat-sen took more convincing, but since he could find no other allies, he accepted the United Front the following year.

The GMD’s alliance with the Soviet Union specified that Russia would not try to convert China to communism and that it continued to renounce the Czarist treaties. In return, Sun accepted that the Chinese Eastern Railway would continue to be managed by the Russians and that Soviet troops could remain in Outer Mongolia. More importantly, Sun agreed to allow Chinese Communist Party members to join the GMD as individuals. He would not accept a formal alliance between the CCP and the GMD as between two equal entities but, in effect, this is what happened. Communists joined the GMD “as individuals” but secretly continued to work together as communists.

This was the origins of the First United Front between the GMD and the CCP. Though the details were largely kept secret at the time, something like 3 million rubles (2.7 million yuan) was given to the GMD between 1923 and 1927, and the Comintern sent well over a hundred advisers. Aid included the gift of some arms and the sale of more. No wonder the British and Americans considered Sun – and later Chiang Kai-shek – to be “Red Bolsheviks.” From Sun’s point of view, the price the GMD had to pay was not great. Chinese communists agreed to abide by GMD rules and policies. The Comintern expected the GMD to strengthen itself organizationally, to pursue anti-imperialist policies, to prepare for agrarian revolt, and to support the workers’ movement. All of this Sun wanted as well. Moreover, the Comintern and Sun reorganized the GMD along Leninist lines; with Comintern help, then, Sun came to control an efficient political machine for the first time in his life.

Fortunately for the United Front, the Comintern’s chief representative was now Mikhail Borodin (1884–1953), an experienced revolutionary, a
highly capable organizer, and “a subtle psychologist.” Borodin was descended from a family of rabbis in Belorussia. Arrested after the revolution of 1905, he fled to the United States for twelve years. He could thus communicate directly with Sun in English. His first job was to convince Sun to delay plans for launching a military expedition against the northern warlords. Borodin heaped praise on Sun in public, though in his confidential reports to Moscow he called Sun “very backward” and egotistical. But if Borodin gained Sun’s trust, he did so on the basis of his competent advice, not trickery.

At a time when the GMD was hard-pressed to survive even in Guangzhou, Soviet aid was of immediate significance. On the Communists’ side, Li Dazhao was the CCP leader most in favor of the United Front, promising that the CCP would help the GMD promote revolution as far as its aims coincided. Though some of Sun’s most trusted aides were hostile to the Communists, Sun was genuinely committed to the United Front, confident that he could ultimately manipulate the Comintern and the CCP to his own ends. “We merely yoke up the Soviet Union and mount it,” Sun promised. However, those who were riding whom would prove to be a difficult question.

The role of the Comintern in the Chinese revolution has been controversial in the West and China. Some Western historians argued, particularly at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s, that the entire Chinese revolution was directed from Moscow. This seems vastly exaggerated. Over time, Chinese leaders emerged who made decisions according to local conditions. Communism was “sinified” not only through practice but through the creative input of Chinese ideas. There were continual tensions between the Comintern and the CCP—Chinese Communists were not passive agents of Moscow. At the same time, the Comintern itself understood that the Chinese would have to develop their own policies rather than imitating the Russian Revolution. Comintern agents were always at least one step removed from Chinese realities: they depended on the very Chinese they were trying to influence to tell them what was going on in the first place. Sun Yat-sen persistently refuted Marxism, and he rejected Comintern tactics that he did not agree with.

The Chinese Communists, on the other hand, had to follow Comintern orders. This contributed to disaster, as we will see, in 1927, but thereafter the Chinese kept Moscow at a distance. It is misleading, overall, to conclude that the Chinese revolution was “directed” by the Comintern. In a word, the Comintern made it possible for strong revolutionary parties in China to be formed—that is, both the CCP and the GMD—but it could not determine the priorities of the Chinese revolution. In the 1911 Revolution students and intellectuals had focused their attention on assassinations and mercenary armies rather than trying to reach out to large groups or classes. But in the Nationalist Revolution of the 1920s, the new professional revolutionaries repudiated the individual as the key agent of meaningful social change. Rather, the disciplined Party organization emerged in theory and practice as the key to systematic political change. The new revolutionaries did not look inward to questions of culture or the family but outward to the whole economic and social structure.

What Borodin taught the GMD was the need to reach out to “the masses”–first the workers of Guangzhou and the peasants of Guangdong Province—and the need to restructure the Party. A Reorganization Congress took place in January of 1924. Pushed hard by Sun, the congress voted to make Party discipline absolute. For example, GMD members of a labor union or some other extra-Party body were to act as a unit, always voting together. Organizationally, each membership level elected representatives to the next higher level in congresses; between elections members were to obey orders that came to them from higher levels. Many saw these provisions as democratic assurances that new “emperors” would not be able to emerge. In practice, however, the GMD was built as a Leninist party: the reorganization actually ensured top-down decision-making. The reorganization and the GMD’s commitment to “national revolution” gave the Party an unprecedented sense of organizational purpose and cohesion. Members were re-registered to emphasize the significance of the reorganization.

Still, the GMD remained highly factionalized. Many of its oldest members distrusted the Communists. They would go along with Sun, but they did not like it. Hu Hanmin, for example, opposed the GMD’s apparent turn to the left and saw the Communists more as rivals than allies. Even though Sun brought all his prestige and authority to the United Front, GMD opposition to the Communists bubbled up frequently before and after Sun’s death in March 1925, until the alliance collapsed in a bloodbath in 1927. Sun himself, at the January 1924 Party Congress, resisted Borodin’s efforts to get the GMD to declare a public anti-imperialist alliance with the Soviet Union, and to confiscate land across Guangdong and redistribute it to the peasants. A formal alliance with the Soviet Union would only heighten the Powers’ distrust. And land distribution was tricky, because the GMD still depended on overseas supporters, many of whom owned land in rural Guangdong. But the manifesto did call for land redistribution, a clear step to the left, although without specifying where such land was to come from. The Guomindang claimed some 30,000 members in Guangdong in late 1923, but barely 3,000 had renewed their membership when the Congress met. By 1926 it had some 200,000 members.

GMD control of even Guangzhou was at first tenuous. Still, taxes were reorganized, which proved profitable since the city was an important port. Sun simply seized control of the foreign-managed salt monopoly, but the foreign-managed customs revenue continued to go to Beijing. Guangzhou received fairly good government by most accounts, and Sun was able to support a growing army. GMD tax revenues increased from 8 million yuan in 1924 to 15 million yuan in the first 6 months of 1926.

Growing revenues allowed Sun to plan for a northern expedition to conquer Beijing, which dismayed the Communists (and others) who thought...
Communists often acted as the most effective political commissars. The political bureaus and Party representatives of the armies had various functions. They were to make sure officers followed GMD directives, instill discipline in the troops, and oversee army-civilian relations. They were to punish military abuses of civilians but also, more importantly, to convince civilians of the desirability of cooperating with the army. They issued propaganda to the troops and to the civilians in areas where the army was based or traveling. Finally, they represented soldiers who had grievances against officers, providing an important safety valve and a way for generals to learn which officers were incompetent or sadistic. The GMD armies totaled about 100,000 troops by mid-1926 and could defeat armies several times their size.

Much of the great success of the GMD and the CCP – or the United Front – in the mid-1920s cannot be attributed to superior organization, military strength, or the Comintern's advisers and cash. Rather, the political force generated by the United Front meshed with ongoing social change to produce a synergistic effect. Radical demands for change among urban workers, peasants, women, and youth were not caused by GMD and CCP "mobilization of the masses" but were vastly strengthened when they could combine with these outside political organizers. Communist work with the peasantry will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 11 and 14, but let us look at the radicalization of workers here.

The "May Thirtieth" movement (1925)

In January 1922 a massive strike broke out in Guangzhou and Hong Kong. Some 30,000 seamen and dock workers refused to sail ships or move cargo, immobilizing over 150 ships and directly challenging the authority of Great Britain. Over the next two months their strike was joined by an estimated 120,000 sympathetic workers, from street stall vendors to the advanced electrical plants' workers. The ship owners thereupon capitulated. The seamen won the right to a union and wage increases from 15 to 30 percent. This demonstrates what workers could achieve largely on their own, before the GMD and CCP became involved in workers' issues. It also impressed the Comintern agents in China. However, the political context was still crucial. The 1922 seamen's strike resulted from organizational energies that in many ways stemmed from the May Fourth movement. Moreover, the political sympathies of Sun Yat-sen and Chen Jiongming in the southeast had at least indirectly fostered the union movement over several years. And the British authorities in Hong Kong were relatively restrained.

Without detracting from the energies and skills of the Guangzhou seamen themselves, the importance of political context is made clear when we consider what happened to railway workers who went on strike in northern China the following year. In that case the workers, who had formed a union under Communist guidance, were directly attacked by the armies of Wu Peifu – a major warlord with a reputation of being somewhat sympathetic to social...
goals, as political scientist and labor historian Elizabeth Perry stresses. Shanghai was China’s premier center of modern industry, with both foreign-owned and Chinese-owned factories producing everything from cloth and machinery to cigarettes, paper, and matches. Shanghai’s factories were the largest and most modern in the country, yet most were still little more than small dark workshops. Aside from factories, Shanghai found employment for thousands of service workers in transportation, the post office, the barbershops, night-soil removal, and construction. We have seen how these workers were organized to strike with remarkable speed in the May Fourth movement through guilds, native-place associations, and gangs. The strongest workers’ organizations were neither modern industry-wide unions nor workplace associations. Rather, they were guilds combining workshop bosses with ordinary craftsmen; native-place associations with their merchant leadership; and the gangs heavily involved in drugs, smuggling, extortion, robbery, and labor recruitment could mobilize the most workers.

Yet a new kind of labor movement began to emerge out of the May Fourth movement. As the initial burst of enthusiasm died down in June, a core of activist workers from disparate industries met to plan for a permanent workers’ organization. Such organizations were often modeled on foreign workers’ movements—news of which was spread by China’s early anarchists, by the May Fourth radicals, and by the thousands of Chinese workers who were returning from Europe after World War I. From this time onward, May Day—the international labor day—became an important occasion for demonstrations and protests, at least in Shanghai and Guangzhou.

Hundreds of young GMD and CCP organizers joined the workers in the wake of the creation of the United Front. By 1924, there were over 120 CCP cells in greater Shanghai, though not all of them were involved in the labor movement. The Communists were the first to try to influence Shanghai’s workers, though the Nationalists later won control of the postal union. Initially, Communist organizers faced many problems. Students could infiltrate the guilds of skilled artisans and help turn them into unions such as those of the mechanics and printers. But the world of unskilled labor was much more amorphous to begin with, and the influence of Shanghai’s criminal gangs was hard to dent. The Communists discovered they would have to infiltrate the gangs, especially the large and powerful Green Gang, in order to make an impact on Shanghai’s unskilled workers. Even so, they found it particularly difficult to unionize Shanghai’s tens of thousands of women workers. Perhaps as a male-dominated organization, the CCP was not very well equipped for this task. Certainly, the CCP often dismissed women workers as “backward,” although they struck their factories as frequently as did men workers. But they often did so for different reasons and on the basis of traditional mutual aid “sisterhoods” rather than unions. Still, during the major strike waves of 1919 and 1925, women and men workers cooperated in a common cause.

reform. However, his soldiers killed thirty-five recalcitrant workers and wounded many more. Then one of the union leaders who refused to give a back-to-work order was beheaded and his head hung on a telephone pole by way of example. The workers went back to work.

As workers organized in the course of the May Fourth movement, disciplined unions grew—able to conduct lengthy negotiations, to adopt a variety of tactics, and to prepare for strikes. Shanghai and the Guangzhou Delta saw the most labor activity, often against foreign firms, while northern China had a less developed economy and harsher anti-union policies. Strike waves occurred during the broad anti-imperialist movements of 1919–22 and 1925–7, with a lull during the recession of 1923–4 and after the suppression of the left in 1927. Wages and working conditions prompted the great majority of strikes, which often achieved at least partial gains. In other words, strikes were not “caused” by anger at imperialism, and strikes against Chinese owners were as common as against foreign owners. Yet workers certainly were motivated by patriotic sentiment, as were other groups. As a cotton worker from Shanghai recalled the May Thirtieth movement of 1925 (discussed below, pp. 206–209):

At the time anti-imperialist sentiments were not only prevalent among workers. Any Chinese who lived in Shanghai shared such feelings. During the strike even the police, the night-soil carriers, the servants at foreign residences, and the cooks all joined.... Certainly the Communist Party could never have been powerful enough to generate these sentiments. When people heard that the foreigners had killed one of us Chinese they were furious and felt that we must resist.

Many actions were limited to a single factory, but over time workers were able to cooperate across the boundaries of status, occupation, and place of origin. The workers’ movement was eye-opening to radical students. Thinking of the workers’ involvement in the May Fourth movement of 1919, one such student later recalled:

The gentlemen of the upper stratum had so far not bothered to take note of laborers. With this movement, laborers demonstrated their power to bourgeois intellectuals, who could not but be impressed with its magnitude.... Some student leaders of the May Fourth Movement henceforth launched their “down to the people” movement and organized laborers’ schools and trade unions. This group of petty bourgeois students was naturally close to the proletariat; they gradually became Communists and joined the Communist Party.

So spoke Deng Zhongxia (1894–1933), who was describing himself among others. Not that the workers became the pliant tools of Communists or the GMD. They maintained their own traditions of protests and their own
The Communists preached the gospel of class conflict—but real, breathing workers did not necessarily think of themselves as a united proletariat. Rather, they were divided horizontally by job, native-place, and status, and they frequently made use of vertical ties to factory foremen, gang bosses, and wealthy merchants from their home provinces. Conversely, the Nationalists preached the gospel of class harmony—economic development through cooperation between labor and capital—but the workers had genuine grievances against their bosses, both foreign and Chinese. The United Front did not end the rivalry between the GMD and the CCP, but formal cooperation at least led to more effective mobilization of Shanghai's working class. Communist organizers were mostly students or former students—but an increasing number of workers were admitted to the Party in the mid-1920s. Both students and workers came to understand that effective organization had to be built on existing structures. This meant, for example, trying to make alliances between workers who had emigrated to Shanghai from different provinces rather than erasing provincial boundaries in a super-union. In other words, it was futile to replace gang and guilds based on native-place ties; Communists had to appeal to their leaders and members on their own terms. Brotherhoods were cemented by swearing oaths in dark temples and drinking wine with chicken blood and other "feudal" practices.

The "May Thirtieth movement" of 1925 led to a nationwide wave of radicalization. Early 1925 was a time of increased tension in Shanghai. The Chinese bourgeoisie was disturbed over the desire of the Powers to raise wharfage fees; workers were hurt by a fall in the currency and a rise in rice prices. When forty adult male workers in a Japanese-owned cotton mill were fired and replaced by young female workers, workers struck twenty-two Japanese factories. That strike petered out, but a new strike was called in May. A Japanese foreman killed a Chinese worker in a scuffle on 13 May. A large public memorial service was held for the Chinese worker on 24 May; strikes spread. On 30 May, under Communist auspices, a demonstration was held. It resulted in the British Sikh police firing into the crowd, killing thirteen and injuring over fifty, mostly workers. This provoked wide-scale reaction and indeed garnered sympathy for China from around the world. Shanghai and Guangzhou were shut down by a general strike: merchants, workers, and students joined the struggle. Demonstrations and anti-foreign boycotts spread to other cities as well.

In Shanghai, more than 200,000 workers from 200 businesses joined the strikes. The Chinese Chamber of Commerce contributed heavily to strike funds. After about a month, Chinese-owned businesses opened, and they did rather well as the boycotts continued. However, when the foreign-owned electricity companies shut off services to the Chinese portions of Shanghai, Chinese businessmen turned against the general strike. A number of workers, too, grew disgruntled with meager strike pay or the difficulty in getting any financial support at all. Warlord suppression began to tighten.

The strike was finally called off in September. Workers won a few economic gains, but none of their political demands were granted. These had ranged from the recognition of trade unions, the right to organize, and freedom of speech and assembly, to the withdrawal of foreign troops and the abolition of extraterritoriality.

Still, Shanghai's working class—and its Communist supporters—had shown their muscle. The Communists formed the Shanghai General Labor Union in June, just after the strike wave got under way. This was theoretically part of the United Front, but the GMD was in disarray after Sun Yat-sen's death in March and played little role in the Shanghai labor scene. By this time a significant number of Communists had become the "brothers" and "disciples" of Green Gang bosses. The support of the Green Gang was critical for any widespread strike since factory foremen and labor bosses were almost invariably members. The May Thirtieth strikes in Shanghai can be seen as an alliance between workers, Communists, and the Green Gang that won general support in the name of Chinese nationalism. Its enemies included the GMD right, conservative workers associated with GMD politicians, some gang leaders, and of course foreign officials and merchants.

The May Thirtieth movement was not simply an acute example of labor strife, however. Like the May Fourth movement of 1919 it rapidly turned into a national set of workers' strikes, student demonstrations, and boycotts against foreign goods. It was essentially a political movement, with political consequences. It is important to note that it was not the death of the worker in the 13 May scuffle that caused national reaction. It was the deaths of unarmed students on 30 May that provoked shock and horror across China. One poet wrote in proud mourning:

The British police have killed and wounded countless numbers of students.
We honor all you have served as a sacrificial vanguard!
Oh, the dead;
Oh, the dead;
Glorify these dead!
Your blood will irrigate the soil and bring forth bright red flowers.

For several months, then, student associations and merchant guilds joined workers' groups to organize street lectures, rallies, pamphleteering, and, of course, memorial services. Youths performed street skits to teach Shanghai's citizens what had happened. "Wailing corps" cried in unison during memorial services. Blood was smeared on flags to symbolize the martyrs. Photographs and woodblock prints served as constant reminders of the dead. From Shanghai, waves of strikes and demonstrations spread to other cities, spurring unionization in places like Tianjin, where factory workers and sailors virtually brought the city to a halt. In Beijing, 30,000 students left their classes to demonstrate on 3 June. In Manchuria, British–American
Tobacco Company workers in Shenyang went on strike on 5 June. Up the Yangzi River, British machineguns killed eight Chinese demonstrators in Hankou on 11 June. Strikes began in Hong Kong and Guangzhou on 19 June. These were brilliantly led by Deng Zhongxia with the cooperation of the Guomindang's left wing. By July, a Tianjin General Labor Union was established. On 23 July some 60,000 demonstrators attempted to cross into the Shamian concession in Guangzhou. The demonstrators included armed cadets from Huagpu Military Academy and firing broke out. No one knows who started the firing, but when it was over British troops had killed at least 52 demonstrators and wounded 117. A national general strike followed. From Hong Kong, some 250,000 Chinese, about 45 percent of the Chinese population, left for Guangzhou or their native villages around Guangdong, where they would stay for the next sixteen months of strikes and boycotts. Deng made sure that labor organizers did not neglect the countryside.

Throughout the summer of 1925, then, students and workers periodically threatened to take over the streets of China's cities. In Shanghai and Guangzhou they marched to such slogans as "Help the workers," "Support the arrested students," "Down with imperialism," and "Take back the concessions." However, at the national level the movement was suppressed by the end of the summer. Chinese troops with British and Japanese support began to detain demonstrators in August. In Tianjin, 8,000 troops killed dozens of workers and arrested 500, suppressing student and worker unions. Chinese business interests were ambivalent after the first wave of patriotic emotion passed. Merchants were susceptible to patriotic appeals, as in the earlier May Fourth movement, but they were no friends to radical unionism and many ultimately depended on foreign trade. Across northern and central China the movement was halted in its tracks. In Shanghai, the General Labor Union was soon forced underground, its leaders executed.

In one sense, it is difficult to say that the May Thirtieth movement accomplished anything. Unlike the protestors in the May Fourth movement, who held victory parades when the "three traitors" were dismissed from government, the May Thirtieth protestors could point to few specific accomplishments. The addition of a few Chinese to the Shanghai Municipal Council (governing the International Settlement) was obviously tokenism. Perhaps the defenders of foreign privilege felt satisfied with the situation as autumn began. If so, they did not remain complacent for long. The May Thirtieth movement fueled the rapid growth and expansion of both the GMD and the CCP. The prestige and authority of the United Front was enormously increased by its leadership of the movement. The tide of radical anti-imperialism was not in fact turned but continued to flow out of the southeast. It is significant that even anti-student warlords were forced to tolerate some demonstrations at the peak of the movement. Though Hunan's governor threatened to shoot anyone who "preached Bolshevism" or "disturbed the peace," the political balance of power had shifted.

The May Thirtieth movement occurred against a background of the intensification of warlordism, the growing prestige of Sun Yat-sen, and the illegitimacy of the Beijing governments, which were failing to deal with new refugee problems, financial crises, and the unequal treaties. However, for all its obvious importance, it might be better to see the May Thirtieth movement as neither a beginning nor a culmination, but as part of a longer, painful process in which demands for social justice and the desire for collective identity meshed to bring increasing numbers of people into the political process. More sectors of society became radicalized—workers, obviously, and in some areas peasants as well. Above all, the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party emerged from the movement as newly legitimate national representatives of China's future.